

**THE VICTORIA BRIDE  
ON THE EDGE OF DANGER AND DESPAIR:  
LIVING AND WORKING IN NINETEENTH CENTURY MONTREAL**

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## **A Note to Teachers**

### **on the Purpose and Goals of the Project**

The curriculum for the History of Quebec and Canada course introduces tenth grade students to many of the important figures and events that have shaped history. By learning about the politicians, inventors and artists who have influenced Canadian society over the past millennium, students become engaged in both their society and the social science discipline. The current curriculum can also be expanded in a number of fascinating ways. The goal of this project is to help students consider the many Canadians who did not leave behind a history that is easily accessible. By focusing on the labourers who built the Victoria Bridge, it shows the way in which historians can piece together the lives of men, women and children who were not prominent members of society. The questions that follow the text are meant to encourage a deeper understanding of the material presented by getting students to interact with history on a personal level. Furthermore, the project aims to dispel the myth that history is merely concerned with events of days past. Rather, it presents history as an ongoing narrative, where past events shape the world around us. Introducing students to the abundant resources of the McCord Museum of Canadian History, particularly the Notman Archives, reinforces this idea. These images allow students the opportunity to both imagine and illustrate what daily life in Montreal was like for the working class during the period of industrialization.

## **On the Edge of Danger and Despair: Living and Working in 19th Century Montreal**

### A City in the Midst of Great Change

Montreal was a city undergoing rapid transformation in the mid-nineteenth century. While this change was felt across the entire city, its effects were most apparent on the city's southwestern fringe, in the area known today as Pointe- Saint-Charles and Saint-Henri. The Lachine Canal, which was largely responsible for the industrialization of the area, was expanded during the 1840s. With this expansion came the building of a number of new factories on the shores of the canal, where factory owners could take advantage of easy access to Montreal's harbour. The jobs offered at factories, such as the Redpath Sugar Refinery, attracted many new arrivals to the area. But the single greatest source of employment during the 1850s was the construction of the Victoria Bridge. The bridge, the purpose of which was to connect Montreal to the growing network of North American railways, was one of the largest engineering projects ever undertaken. It took five years to build, and employed some 3,040 men in its construction between 1854 and 1859. The conditions under which they worked were often perilous. The labourers, many of whom were recent arrivals from Ireland, were confronted with Montreal's notoriously poor climate, with its long, cold winters and short, hot summers. The work was gruelling and dangerous, and the pay left the workers and their families little in the way of security. Amidst such conditions, Montreal's working class developed strategies to survive. The importance of the family unit is crucial to understanding their lives.

### Life at Home

When historians set out to describe the daily lives of prominent historical figures, such as John A. Macdonald, they have a wealth of evidence to turn to. Countless biographies have been written, and personal letters have been preserved over the years. When setting out to perform the same task with the working class, historians are faced with a much more daunting challenge. Few, if any, of the men who laboured on the Victoria Bridge had a chance to write down their memories of the time. Instead, historians turn to other sources, and piece together what they can from records such as census data, city directories, and records collected by the companies that employed the working class. Through these we can cobble together an idea of what may have been a typical experience for the working family.

### The Home Front

While the men who worked on the Victoria Bridge may be difficult for historians to trace, their wives and daughters are even more so. It is apparent that women did not work outside the home on a consistent basis. While most sought employment prior to marrying, few did so afterwards, unless their husbands

died or abandoned them. Their place in the family economy, however, was crucial. Married women had the difficult task of converting the meager earnings of their husbands into food and other necessities. This was often achieved in homes that lacked running water and proper insulation. It is likely that a large percentage of these women performed piecework, sewing garments at home for a petty rate. Before it was banned for being unsanitary, many working class families kept livestock, usually pigs and cows, as a dependable source of food. Whether or not teenage girls worked depended largely on the economic situation of their family. If her father did not have a dependable income, a girl would seek employment of her own. Some worked with their mother in the home, while others sought outside employment, often in the garment trade or for tobacco companies. A number of girls worked as domestic servants in the homes of wealthy Montrealers, which would often separate them from their families.

### Men at Work

Men often had more stable employment than women. Before the age of eighteen, boys would be working outside the home. During this period, types of employment were largely segregated along ethnic lines. Immigrants from England and Scotland, many of whom had experience working in factories in their homeland, were usually awarded the jobs that were thought of as skilled labour. The Irish and French Canadians were generally left with the lower paying jobs. The huge influx of immigrants arriving from Ireland, coupled with the migration of French Canadians from rural Quebec, provided Montreal capitalists with a constant supply of cheap, unskilled labour. The engineering reports of the Victoria Bridge provide us with an idea of what type of work these men performed. While there was a clear division between skilled and unskilled workers, both in tasks and monetary reward, it is apparent just how dangerous working on the bridge was for everyone involved. In order to construct the stone piers that the bridge rested upon, massive Cofferdams were built to dam portions of the St. Lawrence River so that labourers could work directly on the riverbed. With the strong current of the river pounding the walls of the dam, leaks were common, and men were often whisked away by the current. The lucky ones survived. The same was true of the riveters, perched above the river on scaffolding. The slightest error risked the safety of both the worker and those who surrounded him. Local newspapers carried accident reports from the construction site. The *Montreal Pilot* reported that "a number of men were hoisting a piece of timber when the tackle broke and the log fell upon a young man named Edward Burke, crushing his head dreadfully." Other reports spoke of men carried away by the current, their bodies never to be discovered.

### Widowhood

When men were killed on the job, as twenty-seven were during the construction of the Victoria Bridge, they left their families in an even more perilous position than they had been before. Working class families would have been in no position to accumulate savings of any sort. Many widows would be forced to enter the job market on a permanent basis. Factories paid women a lesser wage than men, on the assumption that their income was only a supplement to the family income. This made it very difficult for

women who had suddenly become the primary breadwinner of the family. Many relied on the generosity of friends and family, as well as the benevolence of charitable organizations. Returning to the homes of parents was a preferable solution, but that was not always possible.

### **What has Become of Montreal, a Century and a Half Later?**

Often, the most important evidence a historian has of the working class is the physical remains of the neighbourhoods in which they lived. While the past 150 years have undoubtedly changed Montreal, many of the landmarks of working class life in the nineteenth century are still standing. Modern-day visitors can still see portions of the housing built by the Grand Trunk Railway to house their employees. Few of the factories that employed so many in the area are still in operation, and those that are do not operate at the same capacity as they once did. But many of the structures are still standing along the Lachine Canal, where many 21st century Montrealers spend summer days bicycling and rollerblading. The Victoria Bridge is still there, though cars now pass over it more than trains. Perhaps the most striking reminder of the area's rich history is the monument, erected by the men employed on the construction of the bridge, in honour of the six thousand men, women and children who died during the voyage from Ireland to North America. Although the monument still stands, commuters driving into and out of Montreal now drive directly over the nearly six thousand graves that surround it everyday. One of the most important tasks of the historian is to consider the way in which those of us in the present day remember our past, and what lessons we can take from it to improve our future.

## Questions and Activities

*These questions and activities ask you to put yourself in the place of a member of Montreal's working class during the mid-19th century. Draw on the information in the text you have just read to craft your response, as well as the visual resources of the McCord Museum, which you may use to illustrate your ideas. You are not limited to the images included below. Rather, they are reference points on how you can use images to bring a historical idea to life.*

1. You have recently immigrated to Canada to work on the construction of the Victoria Bridge. Having settled down with your family on the southwestern edge of Montreal, you write a letter to your brother back in England. In your letter, talk about what life is like in Montreal, about your home, your work, and your family.
2. You are an intrepid young reporter for a large Montreal newspaper. Your feelings stirred by an accident report from the site of the Victoria Bridge, you visit the widow of the deceased worker. In what ways do you find her life has changed? What has become of her family?
3. You are an award-winning reporter for an important Montreal newspaper. Your editor has given you the assignment of a lifetime: You are to spend a day in the southwest of Montreal, and write a series of articles about daily life in the district. What will your report consider? Who should you interview, and why?
4. You have been asked to speak at an anniversary celebration of the memorial to the Irish immigrants at the site of the Victoria Bridge. In your passionate speech, you discuss the living conditions of those who immigrated to Canada and built the memorial during the 1850s. What ways do you suggest Montrealers can best preserve their legacy? Are we doing enough as it is?

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