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LADY SARA KIRKE: CANADA'S FIRST FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR OR ONE OF MANY?

Female entrepreneurs have been playing an important role in the Canadian economy for longer than most realize. This paper highlights an example of a seventeenth century entrepreneur in the person of Lady Sara Kirke of Newfoundland's Pool Plantation.

Because little has been written about female entrepreneurs in history, one could be forgiven for believing that women did not play a significant role in the entrepreneurial sector of the economy prior to the latter part of the twentieth century. However, there have been women who would fit the definition of entrepreneurs as those with a willingness to take advantage of business opportunities and to assume the risk involved in establishing and operating a business. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that female entrepreneurs have existed in Canada since the 1600s, and that they played a role in the economy even at that time.

This paper will outline the setting in which female entrepreneurship existed in the seventeenth century. Examples of female entrepreneurship in early Canada will be described with a focus on one entrepreneur, Lady Sara Kirke who operated Newfoundland's Pool Plantation from 1651 until she retired in 1679. Lady Kirke's activities will be placed within the context of her time and her personal characteristics will be compared to those of modern female entrepreneurs. The conclusion will present some observations on the entrepreneurial activities of early Canadian women.

Historical Setting

This paper examines female entrepreneurship in the 1600s in what is now Canada. The first permanent settlements of Europeans were not established until this period even though Europeans had much earlier discovered the area that is now Canada. The paper does not cover the rest of North America, and it focuses on the eastern portion of Canada as it was the first to be settled by Europeans. Table 1 provides significant dates in Canada's history prior to and during the seventeenth century.

Women in Seventeenth Century Canada

The first women in Canada were native and, although they played an active role in their communities and tribes, there is no evidence that they behaved in an entrepreneurial manner (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 19; Prentice, 1996, 5-32). They were contributors in the type of economy that existed, that is, domestic or family, but not in the entrepreneurial economy being emphasized in this paper.

Table 1

Significant Dates to Canada Prior to and During the Seventeenth Century

Date	Event
c. 1000	Vikings travel across Atlantic; settlement in Newfoundland
1372	Basque whalers caught whales off coast of Newfoundland
1480s	Bristol fishermen reportedly voyaged to the Grand Banks to fish
1497	John Cabot's voyage and discovery of Eastern Canada
1500s	Grand Banks becomes destination for European fishermen
1501-1502	Corte-Real brothers explore North Atlantic, including Newfoundland
1524	Giovanni Verrazzano explores east coast of North America
1534-1535	Jacques Cartier's voyages to Gulf of St Lawrence area
1583	Sir Humphrey Gilbert claims Newfoundland as first British colony
1608	Samuel de Champlain's founding of Quebec
1610	John Guy establishes settlement at Cupids, Newfoundland
1621	Lord Baltimore sends team to establish colony on Avalon Peninsula
1625-1649	Reign of Charles I
1649-1660	Commonwealth period (Oliver Cromwell in power, 1653-1658)
1660-1685	Reign of Charles II
1663	New France becomes royal province of France
1670	Hudson's Bay Company chartered

Some European women who migrated to New France were familiar with business enterprises as it was common practice for a woman to participate in her husband's business (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 17). The first family to live permanently in New France was that of Louis Hébert, an apothecary, who arrived in 1617. His wife, Marie Rollet, worked closely with him, but there is no mention of her independently operating the business (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 17-18; Prentice, 1996, 34). The contributions of Hélène Boullé, wife of Samuel de Champlain, differed from those of Rollet, but were still not entrepreneurial in nature. Boullé arrived in 1620 but stayed only four years before returning to France. Boullé was wealthy in her own right, and spent her time in New France involved with charitable activities.

Wives of merchants frequently played an active role in their husbands' business enterprises. They often kept the accounts and managed the servants or apprentices. Most of the time, this was done out of necessity. Husbands might be absent for long periods of time travelling back to France and on trading expeditions into the interior. During these periods, wives took complete charge of households, farms, and businesses (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 20; Prentice, 1996, 41).

Beginning in the 1630s, members of female religious societies began to play a role in the material, social and spiritual development of the colony. These women established various educational, health, and religious institutions. They demonstrated diverse organizational talents, were resourceful, and were capable of supervising large numbers of workers or members of the order (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 34-37; Prentice, 1996, 34-37). Jeanne Mance, founder of the first dispensary (Ville Marie, 1641), was one of the best known of these religious women. Prentice (1996, 35) notes that, "As an entrepreneur, she [Mance] must have had few equals." Although their accomplishments were significant in the development of the country, these women are not entrepreneurs as defined in this paper because they operated social agencies and not commercial enterprises.

By the mid-1600s, women operated small businesses that sold imported materials, clothes, furs, liquor, and utensils. Women often operated inns or taverns, businesses sometimes made more profitable by cheating natives or drunken soldiers. Some turned their inns into gambling dens or houses of prostitution. Jeanne Enard, who arrived in Trois Rivières in 1639, is an example of such an entrepreneur. She was known as a good businesswoman, trading in brandy with the natives and organizing trading expeditions into the interior. An inquiry was demanded into her questionable business practices in 1666. She denied any wrong doing, and her connections with colony administrators ensured immunity from prosecution (Dumont *et al*, 1987, 22-23).

Women were recognized as having played a significant role in the commercial life of New France in the 1600s (Prentice, 1996, 44). They managed commercial enterprises, either those of their husbands or those that were their own, and they contributed to the financial and property ambitions of the family (Prentice, 1996, 46).

The first English presence, of a permanent basis, occurred during the 1600s in Newfoundland (refer to Table 1). Colonies were established on the Avalon Peninsula at Cupids, 1610, and Ferryland in 1621. The Cupids colony survived for only a short period, but Ferryland endured. The Ferryland Colony, known as the Pool Plantation, provides us with an example of a woman who may well have been the most successful female entrepreneur in seventeenth century Canada. But before we meet Lady Sara Kirke, let's look at the status and position of women in seventeenth century England as it may have impacted on their entrepreneurial initiatives.

Women in Seventeenth Century England

While women in Stuart England had some defenders, public opinion generally held them to be “mentally, morally, psychologically and physically inferior to men” (Thompson, 1974, 8). In considering the position of women in the seventeenth century, one should look not only at public opinion, but also at property rights and education or literacy, and the affect that these would have in determining a person's position in society. It is also interesting to consider the nature of work during this period.

In the English common law of the seventeenth century, there were two traditions that governed most aspects of women's property rights. The first was the idea of the *femme covert*, that is, that the wife was totally dependent upon her husband and all legal rights were vested in him. The second convention was that concerning dower rights. Dower rights were the equivalent of a widow's pension. They were a legally guaranteed interest in one-third of the husband's estate after his death. The husband's creditors had no claim on these lands (Thompson, 1974, 164).

In the early part of the century there was a great interest in education, and especially in being able to read. “It was not all that abnormal to find people who could read quite fluently, but who could not write” (Thompson, 1974, 188). Daughters of the relatively well-to-do class would have had some opportunities to be educated either at home or at boarding schools; however, those of the middle and lower ranks would have had considerably less chance of receiving an education.

The work during the period, before the “capitalist industrial” period of the late seventeenth century, has been described as “family industry.” The nature of work was such that it was carried out mainly within the household and was visibly shared by both spouses. Therefore, women possessed a great productive capacity even if their contribution was not always recognized in law or in the interpretation of their personal rights (Clark, 1982). It was usual for women of the aristocracy to be very busy with the affairs that concerned their households, their estates, and even the government. There were numerous accounts of women who, during this period, managed the family estates while their husbands

were away on business, or attending to the affairs of the state, or possibly while their spouses were imprisoned because of an allegiance to the wrong political position. There are also many references to women who owned and managed businesses that required a considerable amount of capital. These businesses included those engaged in money-lending and pawn-brokering, and the names of women often occur in connection with the shipping trade, with contracts, or in business with their husbands (Clark, 1982, 14-41).

It seems reasonable to suggest that, although women did not enjoy the same rights of property and education as did men, they participated in much of the economic activity of the period even if they received little official recognition. An illustration of such participation is provided by a brief review of the economic activities of David and Sara Kirke.

Background to Sir David and Lady Sara Kirke

Sir David Kirke, adventurer, trader, and colonizer, was the leader of the expedition that captured Quebec in 1629, and later governor of Newfoundland. Kirke, in union with Sir William Alexander, formed the Company of Adventurers to Canada. This company held patents issued by Charles I that gave them the sole right to trade and settle in Canada. In the 1620's they established an Anglo-Scottish colony at Tadoussac (Quebec) which they held until 1632 when the area reverted to French control. Sometime during his travels to the New World, Kirke visited the island of Newfoundland and saw its potential for colonization and commerce. In 1637, he was made co-proprietor of the island along with the Marquis (later Duke) of Hamilton and the earls of Pembroke and Holland. The prior right of Lord Baltimore had been set aside when he was accused of deserting the settlement at Ferryland. The patent issued to the Company of Adventurers to Newfoundland forbade any settlement within six miles of the shore and any interference with visiting fishermen, but allowed Kirke to collect an impost of 5 per cent of all fish and oil taken by foreign fishermen (Moir, 1966).

As governor of Newfoundland, Kirke cultivated not only profits, but also enemies. His Company of Adventurers was in conflict with the fishing merchants of western England and their company of "Western Adventurers" who wanted to preserve their control of the Grand Banks fisheries by preventing settlement of the island. Kirke encouraged settlement, and he also fortified Ferryland, St. John's, and Bay de Verde. In addition to these commercial enemies, Kirke acquired a number of political enemies.

Commercial enterprises such as the Company of Adventurers received their license to operate from the Crown and were dependent on royal favour for their existence. In order to keep this royal favour, Kirke supported the cause of Charles I during the English Civil War. The Puritan government of Oliver Cromwell feared that Newfoundland, under Kirke, might be used as a royalist base for counter-revolutionary naval actions. There was sufficient objection to Kirke and his control of the settlement at Ferryland that, in 1651, he was recalled to England to answer charges of withholding taxes collected in the name of the government. His properties were put in the charge of commissioners and his estate was temporarily sequestered. The charges against Kirke were never substantiated and his wife, Lady Sara, was allowed to return to Newfoundland to superintend his business. However, this did not happen until after he had transferred five-sixths of his patent rights to Cromwell's son-in-law. Kirke's problems were not yet over as he was imprisoned as the result of a suit brought by Lord Baltimore's heir. Kirke died in prison in 1654 leaving his wife to contend with many unsettled matters surrounding his enterprises (Moir, 1966).

Little substantial documentation exists about Lady Sara Kirke, but what can be pieced together indicates a woman of strong character and great resourcefulness. Lady Sara had lived through the many

years of her husband's overseas adventures and also the upheaval of the English Civil War. During times such as these, she, and many other women, had opportunities to act independently as they were often left alone with sole responsibility for the maintaining the family and related enterprises. As has already been indicated, she acted as Kirke's agent while he was detained in England. As his widow, she had the right to exercise complete control over the family enterprise until such time as she remarried (Ulrich, 1982, 38; Clark, 1982, 30-34, 160ff).

In truth, Lady Sara did have some choices available to her when her husband died. She could remarry, she could return to England and live under the protection of her family, or she could stay in Newfoundland and run the enterprise. While one can only surmise why she chose to stay in Newfoundland, there are various reasons to believe that staying was a matter of conscious decision rather than one made out of desperation.

Lady Sara may not have remarried because of her high social status that placed her in a position such that the only males in Newfoundland who would have a status equivalent to her would be her own kin. And, while a man might marry below his status, it was unlikely that a woman, given the social constraints of the day, would be able to do so. Had she chosen to return to England she would have had to return to the status of a dependent, this time to her family. Of course, it is possible that neither the thought of remarrying nor that of returning to England ever crossed her mind. Lady Sara could well have been following the examples of two considerable role models among her own family, her sister Frances Hopkins and her mother-in-law Elizabeth. Lady Frances Hopkins was a widow when she came to Newfoundland as a political refugee having harboured the Charles I during the Civil War. Elizabeth Kirke, Sir David's mother, managed the family enterprises when her husband was away and, following his death, had traded on her own account as a London wine merchant (Pope, 1992).

While her reasons for staying remain speculative, what is known is that she did remain and that she independently managed the estate that had been left to her. Evidence of her success is supplied by the census records of the time. For instance, in 1675 only 5 per cent of the planters owned five boats with a mean number of 25.7 servants. Lady Kirke was in this 5 per cent with five boats and a crew of 25 men (Pope, 1992, 271; Berry, 1675). Her sons George, David, and Phillip are also listed in this census with only Phillip employing as many men and owning as many boats. Lady Kirke's name also appears in the 1676 list of planters (The names of the English...1676) along with the names of David and George. Although Lady Kirke did not employ as many men as either of her sons, she was responsible for more boats than the two of them combined.

Summary of Literature About Contemporary Female Entrepreneurship

Now that Sara Kirke's background has been reviewed, it is possible to compare her personal characteristics to those of present day female entrepreneurs. A review of contemporary literature on women entrepreneurs was conducted and will be summarized in three areas: the reasons for becoming involved in a business, the challenges confronting female entrepreneurs, and the factors contributing to their success.

Zapalska (1997) and Maysami (1999) reviewed the literature to identify the factors which motivated women to start or become involved in a business. These factors included: need for achievement, desire to be independent (to be one's own boss), need for job satisfaction, economic necessity, need to control one's own fate, desire to avoid being in a subordinate relationship, fulfillment of self-actualization needs, and satisfaction of a personal challenge. In the studies reviewed, Maysami (1999, 99, 101) observed that there was substantial agreement on the reasons for entrepreneurial involvement. Most studies found the common reasons to be: the desire to control their own futures and

financial destinies, the need for self-determination and financial independence, and their belief that they could do things in a better way.

Research has been conducted on the problems, disadvantages, or challenges confronting female entrepreneurs (Maysami, 1999, 101; Shim et al, 1998, 20; Kalleberg, 1991). The most frequently identified challenges included: lack of confidence in a woman's ability (or lack of acceptance of women in business), lack of capital, lack of financial experience, conflicts between personal and work responsibilities, government paper work, achieving profitability, difficulty in delegating authority, and circumstances in the business' external environment.

Kalleberg (1999) observed that the disadvantage of female entrepreneurs was a common theme in recent literature with the main reasons being barriers related to the socialization process, lack of educational experience, family roles, and lack of networks. After examination of the determinants of survival and success, Kalleberg challenges the conventional wisdom regarding female entrepreneurship. The author cautiously concluded that women were no more likely to fail than men were and that the determinants of success operated in much the same way for men and women.

Maysami's (1999, 102) review of the literature identified the following factors as those contributing to the success of women business owners: family support, communication skills, human relations skills, knowledge of product or service, quality of product and service, customer loyalty, technological advantage, availability of finance, presence of opportunities, and desire to succeed. In his own study of female business owners in Singapore, he found that the main reasons for success were managerial practices (such as willingness to plan and seek assistance, and realistic profit expectations), ability to identify and seize opportunities, relentless drive to make ideas work, and family support. In addition, aspects of the business were important, including, product and service qualities, quality of personnel, knowledge of products and services, customer loyalty, government assistance, technological advantage, and availability of financing (Maysami, 1999, 103). In a study of female entrepreneurs and businesses in Poland, Zapalska (1997) found the causes of success to be: innovation or creation of something new, experimentation, market incentives, independence, achievement, job satisfaction, opportunities, professional attitude, and establishment of business contacts.

According to Zapalska (1997), trait analysis suggests that there are no significant differences between the psychological propensities of successful female and male entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are successful because they possess those characteristics, attitudes, and temperaments that are required for successful entrepreneurship regardless of gender. From a literature review, Zapalska (1997, 76-77) found that successful entrepreneurs, male or female, display masculine characteristics such as competitiveness, active, independence, decisiveness, and self-confidence. In the study of Polish female entrepreneurs, the author found that masculine characteristics dominated: aggressiveness, assertiveness, determination, strong leadership behaviour, highly developed communication skills, and objective and analytical thinking (1997, 78). Similarly, Maysami (1999, 96, 98, 103) found key traits to be self-discipline, perseverance, and intense desire to succeed. Additional aspects of a successful entrepreneur are family support, education, and previous work experience.

To round out this profile of contemporary female entrepreneurs, studies found that the women were in their thirties and forties, well educated, had considerable business experience, and a majority were married (Maysami, 1999, 96-97; Shim and Eastlick, 1998, 23; Zapalska, 1997, 77).

These findings relating to the personal characteristics of contemporary female entrepreneurship are now compared to those possessed by Lady Sara Kirke.

Exhibit 1
Letter from Lady Sara Kirke to King Charles II, 1660

Dread Sovereign:

It is without doubt that your Sacred Majesty hath been informed of the loyal services my husband Sir David Kirke did (as his duty) to your royal father of happy memory, who in part of recompence made him one of the Lords Proprietors and Governor of this Land. Since the fatal stroke [execution of Charles I in 1649] and my husband's death [1654] I and my Children have lived but in a poor and sad condition and want of a governor here, there is no living but submit to any stranger power that will maintain a government. My suit and petition to your Sacred Majesty is that you would be pleased to confirme that power my husband had upon my eldest son, George Kirke, as...the desire of all the inhabitants and your Majesty shall not oblige me only for it. But, as I have been to your royal father, so I remain,

To your Sacred Majesty's

Most humble subject
and servant,

[signed] Sara Kirke

Text of letter transcribed and edited by Dr. P. E. Pope, Archaeology Unit, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland. Original letter in the British Library (Egerton ms 2395, 258 MHA 16-C-1-041), London, England (Colony of Avalon).

Comparison of Sara Kirke to Contemporary Female Entrepreneurs

Historians have referred to Sara Kirke as an early entrepreneur. Bliss stated that Lady Kirke, after being widowed, "became the first female entrepreneur in Canada, employing twelve boats and more than sixty men" (1987, 28). Another reference, somewhat less boldly, asserts that, "She [Sara Kirke] was almost certainly British North America's first woman entrepreneur" ("Colony of Avalon"). The lack of documentation in her own words prevents us from attributing too much to her actions; but what documentation there is has enabled us to make certain inferences. The reasons for female entrepreneurship, the challenges, and the success factors described above, along with what is known about Sara Kirke, have been used to compare her entrepreneurial characteristics with those of present day female entrepreneurs.

It is clear that economic necessity and the need for financial security were important motivations for Sara Kirke. Upon his death, her husband left her with a debt of £60,000, a substantial sum in the 1600s. Although it is not known whether she paid off the debt, it can be assumed that her financial position was not secure. In spite of her precarious financial state, she apparently felt the need to have control over her own fate and did not wish to be dependent on a male, that is, a new husband, or on her family in England.

The external environment provided Sara Kirke with a significant challenge. The political situation at the time was volatile. When Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, there was some question as to who would gain the proprietorship of Ferryland. In a letter to Charles II, Lady Kirke solicits the King's favour by advising him of both the financial state she found herself in when her husband died, and also of her loyalty to his father, with a promise of the same loyalty to him (Exhibit 1). Despite her petition, the administrative rights to Ferryland were regained by Cecil Calvert, the second

Lord Baltimore. Although Calvert did not reclaim the property or exercise these rights, the threat that he would so do was always there. But Sara Kirke carried on business in the shadow of this threat and in the light of the even more promising threat of physical destruction by the enemies of England as the plantation was subject to raids from any enemy of the English throne. In fact, her establishment was sacked and burned by the Dutch in 1673, but she persevered with her business enterprises against great odds and high risks.

By all accounts, Sara Kirke was a successful entrepreneur. It is agreed that she was the most successful fish merchant on the English Shore and that she conducted business with English and Spanish merchants. The censuses of 1660 and 1670 identify her as the largest planter in Newfoundland. While she did have the familial support of four grown sons and her sister who also lived in Ferryland, she ran the business independently. In order to become such a successful entrepreneur, she must have been knowledgeable of the fisheries and of commerce. She would probably have gained business experience while managing the plantation during the absences of Sir David.

Lady Sara Kirke is an example of a woman whose accomplishments defined her as an entrepreneur. As is true of today's female entrepreneurs Lady Sara appears to have been motivated by necessity, a desire to be independent, and a wish to control her own future and financial destiny. She faced the same challenges that the men of her time faced, the challenges occasioned by political turmoil and destruction by enemy forces. In addition, she was challenged by the constraints imposed by a society that placed legal limits upon the rights of women. In her success, she was regarded not only as a person of very high status, but also as a valued elder statesperson (Pope, 1992, 313).

Concluding Observations

Much focus has been placed on the entrepreneurial skills of modern day women and the challenges that they face, but not as much attention has been given to the antecedents of these women. It is possible to believe that, during the last 400 years, women have demonstrated entrepreneurial capabilities at times, and in places, when the political, social, and economic circumstances were favourable.

This paper has only looked at one women of English Canada in the 1600s. It has presented her in the context of her own times and in comparison with female entrepreneurs of the present. It would be interesting to see a similar paper on female entrepreneurs of New France in the context of women in seventeenth century France.

Whether or not Lady Sara Kirke was the first female entrepreneur in English Canada could be debated; however, it is a debate that will be difficult to resolve because of the scarcity of documentation supporting the cases that could be made for others. Whether the first, or one of many, she remains an interesting example of a seventeenth century woman who could be judged a entrepreneur both by the standards of her own time and by those of today.

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