

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROBERTA HAMILTON, *Setting the Agenda: Jean Royce and the Shaping of Queen's University*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002, 353 p.

Hamilton's biography of Jean Royce, the registrar of Queen's University in Kingston from 1933 to 1968, is a beautifully-written, incisive study of a remarkable woman. *Setting the Agenda* also creatively manages to turn many historical conventions on their head. Hamilton explores academic institutional history through the biography of a mid-level female administrator, rather than through the traditional formal records of the university and its more eminent male presidents, deans, and faculty. She pursues the historical efforts to improve the status of women through the story of a woman who would not have self-identified as a feminist. She goes against the grain by choosing to profile Jean Royce, an individual who most certainly would have disappeared if the biography-writing had been left to her family, friends, or professional historians.

One comes away from this book realizing that there is as much to be learned about an institution from its middling-rank employees as from its official leaders. As registrar, Royce's relations with students, staff, faculty, and administrators provide a fascinating glimpse into the real workings of the university. Those who seek to study the post-World War II feminist movement may discover that women who refrained from publicly labelling themselves as feminist advocates often contributed in extraordinary ways to the advancement of women's rights. Indeed, potential biographers, who cast about for worthy individuals to study, may conclude that many of us have defined our fields far too narrowly.

Hamilton has demonstrated that during her lifetime, Royce "came to personify Queen's University" (9) and that she, more than any other female figure during her years at Queen's, brilliantly managed to negotiate the perilously narrow options available to women within an elite, male-dominated university. These conclusions would not have leapt out at most of us without Hamilton's skilful analysis. Royce was the daughter of a struggling working-class family from St. Thomas, Ontario, who failed to distinguish herself academically. She landed the job of registrar in 1933 primarily because the former job-holder had burned out from overwork and there was nobody else around. As a perfectionist and workaholic, she inspired many students and fellow employees, although she left others quite disgruntled. The secretary of virtually every university committee, she controlled academic agendas and interpreted all the rules, but buried every vestige of her own voice from the official records. Paid

parsimoniously, she managed to feed her bibliophile book-buying habit, indulge in extensive European travel, and still leave a respectable sum to Queen's. A woman whose power over Queen's had been quite unparalleled for decades, she was fired by principal James Corry one year before her official retirement, so that he could install a less qualified male friend as the next registrar. Predictably, Royce's successor was paid substantially more from the outset than Royce had ever dreamed of earning.

Surprisingly cosmopolitan and more open-minded than many men and women of her era, Royce used her position as registrar to serve as "gate-keeper" of admissions and "talent scout" for students. Her unflagging interest in students was complemented by her support for a diverse array of individuals, including those who did not fit the mould of Queen's reputation as a preserve for Protestant, English-Canadian males. Perhaps most fascinating is the section on Royce's personal life, where "Jean the registrar" cedes pride of place to a woman who loved and was loved. Hamilton comments critically on the rigid sense of "family" that corresponds to obituaries, hospital regulations, party invitations, and public policy (14). Illustrating how artificial such classifications can be, she describes the wonderful relationships Royce crafted with colleagues and the neighbours with whom she dined, drank sherry, discussed books, and savoured music. Of Royce's long-term female friendship with Margaret Hooey, another Queen's staff member who became her fellow-traveller, leisure companion, and caregiver during her illnesses, Hamilton writes: "In the past few decades, there has been more social acceptance of homosexuality and a good deal more drifting across boundaries. Jean enjoyed the company of women; in another era, who is to say how she might have lived?" (181). Equally intriguing is her depiction of Royce's longstanding mutually affectionate but platonic relationship with Robert Legget, a married Queen's professor of engineering who maintained a lifelong attachment to Royce. Conceding that "an affair, had one become public, would have ended her career (and possibly his)," Hamilton muses that "Perhaps there is something to be said also about romantic heterosexual relationships. Such friendships may well have flourished, especially before serial (marital) monogamy became a respectable option" (13, 265).

Also impressive is Hamilton's treatment of Royce's bout with depression after her termination, her attempted suicide, her resilient recovery, and her subsequent prodigious contributions to the board of trustees and the Ban Righ foundation at Queen's. Hamilton's early comment that the richness of Royce's interests "made life the grand affair that she took it to be" (161) is poignantly underscored by her subsequent description of how Royce coped with daunting emotional and then physical challenges, and her account of the dignity of Royce's death.

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