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Review of "Mobilizing Mercy: A History of the Canadian Red Cross" by Sarah Glassford

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Sarah Glassford. *Mobilizing Mercy: A History of the Canadian Red Cross*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Pp. 408.

Sarah Glassford's *Mobilizing Mercy* is a taut, insightful, and incisive look at the history of the Canadian Red Cross Society (CRCS)—later the Canadian Red Cross—from its inception on the battlefield of Batoche in 1885 to 1970. Using a plethora of primary sources, including CRCS minute books, annual reports, newsletters, and, for an outside perspective, House of Commons Debates and Sessional Papers, she takes readers on a tour of CRCS work both within Canada and overseas.

The Red Cross emblem is so familiar to people across the world that most of us, this author included, often assume that the organisation has always had lasting appeal, staying power, and has survived the decades with ease. But as Glassford demonstrates, the history of the CRCS is characterised more by “a tension between renewal and obsolescence” (p. 275). As Canadian society was affected by world events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly during and after the World Wars, the CRCS sometimes struggled to stay relevant. Put simply, its work as a neutral humanitarian aid organisation during wartime was easy to justify and understand, but governments and citizens sometimes struggled to see its purpose, and the appeal of volunteering, during peacetime.

Glassford's chapters include discussions of the North-West Rebellion, the South African War, the First and Second World Wars, the interwar years, and the post-1945 era. Perhaps the most interesting chapter is Chapter Three, which examines the CRCS's meteoric rise during the First World War. The war, in Glassford's words, “made the CRCS a national institution” (p. 82). Amidst the burst of patriotism and war fever, the CRCS was able to bring in a surge of donations, volunteers, and local popular support all across Canada. The combination of grassroots enthusiasm and national direction turned the CRCS from a Toronto-centric organisation into Canada's largest humanitarian body. One of the organisation's smartest moves during this period of professionalisation was its advertising activities, which included a monthly periodical begun in April 1915 that conveyed to both Red Cross workers and Canadians more broadly the work it was undertaking on the Western Front and domestically. It was during the CRCS's work overseas, such as with prisoners of war, and metaphorical battles with headstrong Minister

of Militia and Defence Sam Hughes, who wished to “extend his influence into the voluntary sector” by appointing—in an unsolicited manner—three people to the society’s London headquarters, that a growing and consistent struggle between government and the CRCS began to take shape (p. 86).

This struggle was representative of larger changes in Canadian society as the First World War initiated the slow but ineluctable move over the coming decades from private/voluntary charity and aid to public/federal provisions—those in line with “big government.” But that was still far in the future and, as it turned out, a gradual evolution.

What makes Glassford’s combination of institutional and social history approaches so effective is that she is consistently able to balance the macro and micro events. Of particular interest is her emphasis on the CRCS’s change from a largely male-dominated and elite organisation to one with a significant number of middle class women and, later, grassroots leaders. The CRCS was able to deftly steer a path that attracted widespread support because of its spin on “traditionally ‘feminine’ activities” like knitting that allowed women to participate in war work while still extending the domestic space, and appealing to the conservative views of a woman’s “place” in society (p. 122). Of even greater significance was the CRCS’s Information Bureau which provided updates to families on wounded and missing soldiers during the First World War and was referred to by Mary Macleod Moore as the “Mothering Bureau” (p. 122). Such widely varied activities at both a local and international level contributed to the “many and varied meanings” that gave the CRCS a broad appeal (p. 127).

Despite the CRCS’s successes during the First World War, the interwar years led to “mission drift” as the organisation struggled to find a place for itself in peacetime society. A move into public health work emphasising, among numerous other things, the prevention of disease, health care education, and healthy bodies led to financial difficulties when the Great Depression hit and fundraising activities came up dry. Assistance for veterans and general relief measures kept the society afloat, but volunteers nonetheless deserted in droves and the interwar years proved that no voluntary organisation, “no matter how prestigious or widely supported, could provide comprehensive services in the fields of public health or social welfare” (p. 160). Glassford’s emphasis on the constant tension between public and private and the creeping influence of big government over time is a

recurring theme, and she does an excellent job of highlighting both the CRCS's triumphs and struggles amidst those changes.

It must be said that at the back of this reviewer's mind, and I am sure many others' when they began reading this book, was whether Glassford would address the event (unfortunately) most remembered by Canadians in the past several decades: the "Tainted Blood Scandal" of the 1980s, which led to thousands of Canadians contracting HIV and Hepatitis C, and blood transfusion services being (voluntarily) removed as one of the CRCS's activities. Although Glassford's account stops at 1970, to her credit she does address the scandal briefly in her conclusion, and acknowledges the mistakes that were made. This frankness is important, and also helps the book to remain a strong and honest account of the CRCS's successes, trials, and tribulations, rather than letting it edge into hagiographical territory. Although I wish the book had extended beyond 1970, she has nonetheless left the door open for future historians to trace the difficulties the CRCS experienced during the Tainted Blood Scandal and its subsequent activities in the early twenty-first century.

Mobilizing Mercy is an engaging and well-written account of the CRCS's history, and, given that McKenzie Porter's 1960 CRCS-approved (and mainly anecdotal) monograph *To All Men: The Story of the Canadian Red Cross* has been the standard work on the organisation since its publication over sixty years ago, Glassford's book is timely and needed.¹ She has provided a new and refreshing addition to the CRCS's history using a wide range of sources, and has managed a multitude of themes and issues with verve. Given the ubiquity of the Red Cross and how important the CRCS has been to Canadian society, it behooves those interested in humanitarian aid in Canada, and those studying the growth of the big state, among other things, to read this book. Lastly, *Mobilizing Mercy* will of course be of particular use to other (international) historians studying national Red Cross/Crescent/Crystal branches around the world. I learned a lot from this book, and as Glassford convincingly demonstrates, the history of the CRCS to a large degree mirrors that of Canada itself.

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¹ McKenzie Porter, *To All Men: The Story of the Canadian Red Cross* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1960).