

BRUCE G. WILSON — *The Enterprises of Robert Hamilton: A Study of Wealth and Influence in Early Upper Canada, 1776-1812*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1983. Pp. vii, 248.

Because 1984 brought an extraordinary outpouring of books on Ontario history on the occasion of the province's "Bicentennial" and Toronto's sesqui-centennial, it would have been easy for the non-specialist to miss some of the less well-publicized new books on the province. Such may have been the fate of Bruce Wilson's study of Robert Hamilton, which is a revision of his admirable doctoral thesis on the same subject. Yet this may well be the most original and important of all the recent books dealing with the Loyalist period of Ontario's history, for it is nothing less than a comprehensive account of the economic, social, and political development in the Niagara region and Upper Canada as a whole from the American Revolution to the War of 1812.

Robert Hamilton, then aged 22, arrived in Montreal in 1775 to begin a three-year engagement with the eminent firm of the Ellice brothers; his pay in the first year was to be £ 30. Apart from a good Scottish education (Hamilton was the son of a Presbyterian minister, and there was a family tradition of interest in education and the professions), the new clerk brought little with him in the way of wealth and influence. By the time of his death in 1809, however, Hamilton had become one of the richest and most powerful figures in Upper Canada. He was used to playing host at his grand Queenston house to many an eminent tourist come to visit the famous Falls. A measure of his wealth, and of the problems his heirs and executors would face, is the large sum of debts by then due him, —£ 69,000 (N. Y. cy.), owed by over 1200 debtors. He also possessed more than 130,000 acres of land, accumulated as part of a long-term speculation on the province's future.

How Hamilton built his fortune and why he alone of those from Niagara westward was able to do so are the focus of Wilson's book. Hamilton was necessarily, in view of the widely fluctuating commercial conditions of the age, a generalist, involved in the most remunerative activities available to someone in Upper Canada, military provisioning, portaging, the movement of furs, retailing, shipping, lending, foreign exchange, etc. His greatest strengths were to have begun independent trade, in partnership with the man who would match him for commercial eminence in Upper Canada, Richard Cartwright Jr. (soon to be based in Kingston), just as a new commercial era was beginning at the end of the Revolutionary War, and to have gained the backing of one of the leading firms in the St. Lawrence trade, Todd and McGill. As Wilson shows, this made Hamilton and Cartwright part of a powerful network of distinct but interconnected firms joining London, Montreal, and inland points to the farthest reaches of the fur-trading frontier.

Though some, including John Graves Simcoe and Robert Thorpe, thought otherwise, Hamilton and Cartwright were both well-read and well-travelled gentlemen and thus well able to get along with the leading local source of wealth and power, the officers of the British Army. At Niagara, where a number of ex-officers and Loyalists scrambled for a share of the limited income to be earned there in a difficult time, Hamilton, neither an officer nor a Loyalist, did far better than his rivals. Wilson nicely contrasts his rise with the decline of the Butler clan here. Credit, the connections he had made, and competence were the essential elements in Hamilton's success. Not only did he personally prosper, but so did a number of his Scottish relatives who came out to work for him, then founded their own firms; much of the commercial history of the Niagara peninsula can be written in terms of names such as Dickson, Clarke, and Nichol, all Hamilton protégés initially.

Wilson sees Hamilton and his allies in Niagara, Detroit, Kingston, and outside the province (where some of the key levers of power were to be found, especially before the 1790s) as a "merchant oligarchy", acquiring through commerce and the communications system it sustained as much power as anyone in the province. The view of Upper Canada from the Niagara area, and from Hamilton's perspective especially, is rather different from that from York, or elsewhere in the province. For example, Hamilton had no need for a "compact" system of alliances such as Upper Canada would later develop, because he dealt directly and on equal terms with various Lieutenant-Governors and senior officials. In no sense was this oligarchy so powerful as to be impervious to changes in markets and other circumstances, however; insecurity and impermanence remain fully in view, and the reader

is never unaware that even someone as powerful as Hamilton was, and felt himself to be, vulnerable to reverses of fortune.

The attempt to provide suitable futures in the limited circumstances of the province for eleven children and step-children fully demonstrated the difficulty of institutionalizing and making permanent the advantages even a Hamilton could build up. Dramatic evidence of this was the collapse of his entire business system, as inherited by two of his sons, in just three years after his death. Nor would it have been easy to liquidate such an empire in order to return to Britain with one's gains. Instead Hamilton appears to have planned to leave his fortune primarily as an enormous endowment in eventually saleable land.

This makes a fascinating and important story, and Wilson has it in very much the appropriate perspective. Despite the handicap of working without a central body of Hamilton papers, which prevents him from offering a detailed chronicle of the firm based on its accounts and correspondence, he is very successful at recapturing the world of the Hamilton enterprises. A few problems of interpretation do, however, need to be noted. Thus, he uses the term "profit" rather loosely; it appears to stand for mark-up (p. 93) or even gross income (p. 73), rather than some measure of net return after costs are properly allowed for. The merchant's term "advance", meaning mark-up on original invoice value, is misread as meaning payment in advance of receipt of goods (p. 89). The figure of 49,000 barrels of flour said to have been locally ordered by the British Army in 1801 (p. 82) is hugely excessive. The term "creditor" is used at one point where the sense of the passage strongly suggests "debtor" is meant (p. 149, 1.39). More generally, the reader is not always clear on how to read such necessarily comparative terms as "high", "expensive", "overwhelming", and "substantial". Withal, these are modest matters, and they do not affect the book's core arguments or its authority.

The continuation of the Carleton Library, in which this volume appears (now published by Carleton University), is so much to be welcomed that it seems churlish to complain. Even so, it is disappointing that the printers and publishers have not done a better job with the production of this book. Errors that were surely avoidable at reasonable cost include uneven spacing of lines (e.g. there are 47 on p. 160 and just 44 on the facing page), missing lines or parts of lines (pp. 95, 116), smeared ink and blurred typography, and imperfectly legible maps (some categories of data being impossible to distinguish). It is unfortunate that so good a book should suffer such blemishes.

It would be quite wrong to conclude on this negative note, for this is an impressively and imaginatively researched work that demonstrates splendidly the ways in which good business history can be social history at its best. This is as fine an account of Upper Canada's development to 1812 as any now available.

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GAIL LEE BERNSTEIN — *Haruko's World: A Japanese Woman and Her Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983. Pp. xvii, 199.

ROBERT B. MARKS — *Rural Revolution in South China: Peasants and the Making of History in Haifeng County, 1570-1930*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. Pp. xxv, 339.

Both works investigate rural conditions in North East Asia, but this is where the similarity ends. Marks commences his work with a description of his subject and methodology, setting the tone for a piece of solid academic research. Bernstein warns her reader that the presentation of her research does not conform to the conventional academic pattern. Marks aims at writing "social history with