

Sarah Glassford. *Mobilizing Mercy: A History of the Canadian Red Cross*. Xix + 408 pp., plus figs., bibl., index. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. \$39.95 (paperback)

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus



Sarah Glassford.
Mobilizing Mercy: A History of the Canadian Red Cross.
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The Canadian Red Cross Society (CRCS) is an endearing symbol of Canada and Canadian values. For more than a century, the organization has supported humanitarian aid efforts throughout the country and around the world. In *Mobilizing Mercy*, historian Sarah Glassford investigates the emergence, growth, and longevity of the CRCS, questioning how the organization adapted to changing social currents while upholding its core responsibility of providing help and support for the vulnerable.

Glassford blends institutional history with social history, offering a diverse perspective of the CRCS that reflects the organization's place in the broader milieu of Canada. "To trace the history of the Canadian Red Cross is, in many ways, to trace the history of twentieth-century Canada," Glassford contends, strongly introducing her topic with an ambitious statement (8). The organization formed in the late nineteenth century, and Glassford traces the key people and ideas behind its inception and evolution through the 1970s. Documenting nearly one hundred years of history is a challenging and daunting task, but

Glassford skilfully navigates the many and varied currents of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada in a manner reflective of the events and issues that influenced the development of the CRCS.

Militarism, patriotism, and maternalism influenced the Canadian Red Cross Society, Glassford argues. She attributes the organization's history of adaptability to a recognition and embrace of these shifting cultural values, demonstrating how and why the CRCS drifted from its original mission while maintaining a core humanitarian identity. The survival and longevity of the organization hinged on the concept of care, the driving motivation for the individuals who supported the CRCS as a tool for helping vulnerable people both in Canada and around the world.

Glassford's chronological approach is clear and easy to follow. Chapters 1 and 2 examine the military origins of the Canadian Red Cross Society, tracing its beginnings during the Northwest Uprising of 1885 to its first successful wartime effort during the South African War at the turn of the century. Chapters 3 and 4 also explore the influence of war on the organization, as Glassford investigates patriotism and social health values among Canadians during the First World War and interwar period. Chapter 5 considers the organization's efforts during the Second World War, a six-year period marked by successes and challenges that later defined the CRCS in the postwar years. Chapter 6, the final and perhaps most ambitious section of the

book, traces the organization's growing internationalism and humanitarian efforts in Canada and abroad between 1946 and 1970.

Mobilizing Mercy is rich on the recorded history of the Canadian Red Cross Society. Glassford draws on memoirs, private papers, news clippings, magazine articles, parliamentary debates, government records and a range of other primary documents from local, provincial, and national repositories. Her reading of Canadian Red Cross history includes organizational committee minutes, annual reports, and promotional materials from the CRCS. She also examines the writings of prominent middle-class women, including Nellie McClung and L.M. Montgomery. Her work is admittedly thin on francophone voices, a silence that “reflects their conspicuous absence from most CRCS activity before the Second World War rather than a decision to exclude or ignore them in the course of my research” (23). Nevertheless, Glassford's command of the evidentiary record is impressive and she deserves credit for producing as thorough a history of the CRCS as the documents would allow.

Glassford is at her best when discussing the *people* who created, maintained, and shaped the Canadian Red Cross Society. Anecdotes and references to such individuals as George Ryerson (soldier-surgeon and key figure in the founding of the CRCS); Charlotte Whitton (founder of the Canadian Welfare Council);

Adelaide Plumtre (president of the Ontario Division of the CRCS in the 1920s); and W. Stuart Stanbury (architect of the Society's free blood transfusion service and advocate of postwar internationalism), illuminate the complex and important decisions underlying the history of the Canadian Red Cross. At times Glassford's analysis slips, as if to suggest the CRCS was a self-thinking monolithic entity. Overall, though, her work demonstrates the centrality of individual voices to the social and political developments documented in the book.

Readers of *Scientia Canadensis* will find Glassford's work useful for understanding the institutional and social history of Canadian humanitarianism, but do not expect a detailed investigation of the practices underpinning medicine or healthcare in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada. While Glassford discusses medical issues central to the CRCS and its various branches — physicians and nurses, disease prevention and mitigation, blood donor drives and water safety campaigns, among others — her book concentrates on the politics of “renewal and obsolescence,” characterized as central to understanding the history of the Canadian Red Cross Society (275). In this vein, *Mobilizing Mercy* makes a welcomed contribution to Canadian history that will appeal to readers interested in the social and cultural dimensions of Canada's leading humanitarian aid organization.
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