

Obituary



Barbara Mary Wilson, 1931–2014



Image courtesy of the estate of Barbara Wilson.

Barbara Mary Wilson, who passed away in Ottawa on 21 March 2014, had a long and distinguished career at the Public (later National) Archives of Canada, primarily in military archives.

Of good and hearty Scottish and Irish stock, Barbara spent her early years in the Trenton and Kingston, Ontario, areas, where her father worked for the Department of National Defence. He was the lead engineer for the construction of many of the pre-war and wartime Royal Canadian Air Force stations and bases, including what is today Canadian Forces Base Trenton. At an early age, this proximity to the military instilled in Barbara an interest in collecting military badges and related objects, which would become a lifelong avocation.

By her own admission, studying did not come easily to Barbara. She struggled through elementary and secondary school, but eventually completed a BA at Carleton College (soon to become Carleton University) in 1955. While she may not have been known for her scholarly exploits, Barbara did shine at basketball, leading the Carleton Robins women's squad. Her single-game scoring record of 41 points still stands.

In 1955, following a short stint at *Encyclopedia Canadiana*, Barbara was hired by the Public Archives of Canada (PAC). On her arrival at the PAC building on Sussex Drive in Ottawa, she was asked to assist Norah Storey, a respected historian and archivist, and one of the few women on staff. Storey's early mentorship, as she and Barbara worked to catalogue fifty years of research requests, was a valuable experience for a young woman entering an overwhelmingly male profession. Although ten years had passed since the end of the Second World War, veterans were still receiving hiring preference in the

federal government, and before she won a position at PAC Barbara had already experienced some of the barriers faced by women seeking a public service career.

Once she was in the door, she devoted all of her working hours and much of her private life to her profession. For the first twelve years of her career, she focused on pre-Confederation records, mostly British colonial records related to Canada, particularly what was known as the "C Series," the British Military and Naval Records in Canada (RG8 I). This was before PAC had a dedicated federal records program, and therefore identifying and copying relevant British and French colonial records was a significant part of its activities. Barbara's contribution to this task was to coordinate, from Ottawa, the microfilm copying being carried out by Canadian staff at the Public Record Office in London.

In 1967, the changes sweeping across the rest of the country began to have an impact on PAC. The opening of the new headquarters on Wellington Street and the arrival of a younger generation of archivists were two such manifestations. But more dramatic was the wave of federal government records that descended upon the Archives. Barbara seized the opportunity to move into the Public Records Section, still a component of the Manuscript Division, and took on responsibility for the largest of these transfers, the war diaries, and the headquarters and unit records of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, known as Accession No. 1. As she developed her knowledge of the 3,700 feet of records and the wartime context of their creation, they became the foundation upon which she built her reputation as an archivist and as the pre-eminent source on Canada and the Great War.

In an age when the research clientele was less diverse but just as insatiable, Barbara was sought out by all the academic and public historians working in the field of Canadian military history. She was renowned for keeping them informed about new acquisitions and discoveries within the growing fonds of National Defence records. In the days when smoking was still allowed in the fifth-floor cafeteria, Barbara could be found enveloped in a blue cloud talking military history, and occasionally baseball, with visiting scholars. What her colleagues did not know was that Barbara was also engaged in extensive correspondence with a large number of non-historians from Canada and abroad who were looking for war-related information to document a family event or a personal experience. She would accompany these individuals, who often became long-term pen pals, throughout their research adventures. This commitment to service and her knowledge of the records were explicitly acknowledged when PAC management encouraged her to make an application for promotion by interdepartmental peer review, a bargaining right won by the recently formed Historical Research Group, the union in which federal archivists and historians were organized. In 1973, her application was successful, making Barbara the first archivist in a still male-dominated profession to gain a promotion by peers. A former colleague, Jerry O'Brien, described this

achievement as a watershed moment: her promotion cleared the path for the many archivists who would follow over the next decade.

Barbara did not look back, continuing to be productive not only as an archivist but also as a scholar. Because of her knowledge of the Great War, Bill Ormsby of the Champlain Society encouraged her to produce an edited document collection on the effects of the war on the province of Ontario. Published in 1977, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914–1918*, became a standard for those seeking to understand recruiting, conscription, rationing, propaganda, internment, and the other policies and events that shaped the home front during the conflict. The Canadian Historical Association recognized the achievement by awarding Barbara its first Regional History Certificate for Ontario. In the years that followed, she collaborated with her close friend, Colonel Charles Perry Stacey, the former director of the Army Historical Section and author of four official histories. They co-wrote *The Half-Million: The Canadians in Britain, 1939–1946* (University of Toronto Press, 1987), a social history exploring the effects on the British population of the 500,000 Canadians living and training in the United Kingdom during the Second World War. Barbara took some delight in the fact that former Dominion Archivist Kaye Lamb, whom she had always much admired, wrote her a long letter complimenting both authors on the quality of the work. Shortly after the publication of the book, she was again promoted by the Inter-departmental Committee of Peers on the basis of her contributions to the National Archives and Canadian military history.

Although she took great pride in these accomplishments, Barbara felt that the three voluminous research guides she had produced – “The Units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force,” “The Units of the Canadian Militia and Permanent Force,” and “The Regiments and Batteries of the Royal Canadian Artillery” – were her most significant contributions. She referred to them as her “handy-dandy guides.” Written in long hand and totalling over 5,500 pages, the guides are exhaustive and authoritative. While she expressed much personal doubt about the merits of computers, she was quite chuffed when in May 2012 Library and Archives Canada transcribed the guides and put the first of them online, with an acknowledgement of her efforts.

In 1995, when Barbara retired, she remained untouched by the development of archival science as a separate discipline, instead faithfully adhering to the ideals of the public service of her generation. For her, the profession of archivist was foremost one of serving researchers – of acquiring the documents, properly describing them, and helping users find their way through countless sources. It was her aptitude and profound knowledge in carrying out these tasks that led historian Desmond Morton to describe her as a “national treasure.” Nor did Barbara have any use for the mechanics and jargon of modern bureaucracy: pluri-annual plans, vision statements, performance indicators – these were in her view just deformities of the English language.

Shortly after Barbara retired, historian Jack Granatstein, then head of the Canadian War Museum, invited her to volunteer at the museum's archives. From then until her death, Barbara would take delivery of undescribed fonds and, applying her rigorous attention to detail and accuracy, methodically describe the private papers of many members of the military. This work confirmed for her an opinion she had formed over the years: that the records of the Canadian military comprised one of the best sources of social history available in the country.

Both authors of this obituary became colleagues of Barbara's in the 1980s, by which time she had attained near legendary status in the institution. It was not always easy to pierce through her natural reserve, but those who did were rewarded with her good sense of humour and irreverence, and her friendship. Barbara was not one to talk about herself or her accomplishments. At times she could even be gruff. She nevertheless succeeded in leaving an unrivalled archival legacy that will endure for generations to come.

Gabrielle Blais

Paul Marsden

Library and Archives Canada/Bibliothèque et archives Canada