

lection is still valuable. It suggests that marginality breeds space and time to reflect on why things are, and how we can harmonize with ourselves, our neighbours and even our natural landscape.

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Sirluck, Ernest. *First Generation: An Autobiography*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. 409pp.

Though not nearly so close to the chest as, say, Alfred Bader's painstakingly innocuous *Adventures of a Chemist*, this is a self-portrait almost in spite of itself. If this autobiography has a mind-your-own-business quality to it, it is in part because Ernest Sirluck is an administrator by heart and by habit, a semi-public figure sharing only semi-private thoughts. By turns proud and reticent, he was never much of a public relations man. But, as is made amply evident in this book, he was always very good with details, and this ability, together with his highly tuned sense of duty, allowed him to shoulder increasingly heavy burdens. From his undergraduate years (1935-40) at the University of Manitoba to his accession to its presidency (one of his several "Jewish firsts") three decades later, Sirluck demonstrated a propensity for extracurricular responsibility that ultimately cut short his career as a Milton scholar.

The intervening years saw him take up graduate work in English at the University of Toronto, where he fell in love with campus and city, and with his wife-to-be Lesley McNaught, the sister of historian Kenneth McNaught. He followed the political developments in Germany with growing concern, and, when war broke out, served for three years as a Canadian Army intelligence officer. In 1946 he took up a teaching post at the University of Chicago; still ABD at the time, the latter institution's superior resources allowed him to complete his dissertation and earn a tenured position. Eventually he returned to the

University of Toronto (1962) as professor of English and associate dean of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Along the way, we are given glimpses of a nascent Canadian intellectual community struggling to come of age amidst a stifling academic conservatism, to say nothing of the dislocations of war.

It was the provincialism of the Canadian university scene which impelled Sirluck's decision to risk the highly competitive atmosphere in Chicago. He thrived in it. For a Jew to teach English literature was still a rarity in that era, which in this respect makes Sirluck's success story even more remarkable than the scientist Bader's. Over the course of fifteen years (1947-1962), he reinvigorated Miltonic and Spenserian studies there and earned a (sometimes grudging) respect for his handling of departmental politics. There, too, he had the opportunity to meet many of the literary lights of the period: Saul Bellow, Nelson Algren, Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison; and, on a research trip to London, T.S. Eliot. While Sirluck was able to brush up against the larger intellectual world, one gets the impression that he was not entirely of it. These were not his defining moments. A politician first and foremost, he just happened to practice his art within the walls of the academy.

What drives Sirluck's narrative forward and lends it colour, then, are not literary anecdotes but accounts of intra- and extra-mural finagling. Figuring most vividly, for instance, are Bob Rae and Stephen Langdon, student radicals fearful of being co-opted by Sirluck's approach to the deanship at the University of Toronto; and in Manitoba, where a pro-unionist government under Premier Schreyer causes headaches—indeed an unremitting buzz in our university president's bonnet—Sirluck's tale comes to its climax.

These latter, the crises at the University of Manitoba in the early 1970s, were the worst of times for Sirluck and he sometimes took refuge at the old homestead in Winkler, Manitoba. How eagerly the youthful Sirluck looked forward to escaping the small-mindedness and anti-Semitism (William Whitaker's Nationalist Party made inroads there) of this

Mennonite town! Still, though most of his adulthood was spent elsewhere, the farm in southern Manitoba “remained something of an anchor” for him. It was “not friendly, but not threatening,” a place where his Russian-Jewish father “actually owned what in the old country had been the forbidden symbol of security, land.” The larger world into which he escaped introduced him to the realities of urbane anti-Semitism, a parallel universe where one drank better wines and joined—or was blackballed from—better clubs. Sirluck married a Gentile, is an avowed atheist, and had opportunities to deny his heritage. He chose instead to expose instances of social exclusion whenever he encountered them, expressing his Jewishness through his liberalism. He championed Jewish causes quietly but never timidly. As a lad, Sirluck acquired a fondness for firearms and was regarded by the townsfolk as something of a gun-slinger. It was an image he cultivated in order to discourage potential *pogromshchiki*. One senses that he may still see himself as a rifleman, not looking for a fight but ready.

“I’ve been told that I’ve mellowed,” he writes in his concluding chapter, “and I frequently feel the generous glow that comes from acknowledging that someone else’s opinion or judgement has as much chance of being right as my own. But I suspect that the generosity comes largely from not being responsible, not having to decide what is right in a contested situation. At my age it is not hard to be relativistic about distant matters, but in writing these pages and thus reliving earlier struggles I find myself as committed as before.”

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Trehearne, Brian. *The Montreal Forties*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. x+381pp.

*The Montreal Forties* makes a number of significant contributions to a relatively narrow and neglected area of Canadian lit-