

Rideau Hall Staffer's Memoir

Slender Threads,

by Joyce Bryant, CM, BEM

review by Senex, Canadian Monarchist News, Spring 2008.

Almost by definition, a memoir is a more frothy, less consequential book than an autobiography. Often, it is easier, more witty, not so ponderous, and as such, it affords great pleasure to the reader, who shares in the obvious delight the subject reveals in writing of her adventures great or small. So it is with Joyce Bryant's account of a worthy and generally happy life, *Slender Threads*, the title suggesting that she is well aware that her part was played to one side of history's stage. However – as with the prompter at the theatre – the advantaged location gave her perceptive insight into some of the good and great she was fortunate to know and serve.

Bryant's account begins with memories of a halcyon childhood in pre-War Winnipeg. She tells of dancing around a school maypole in a white frock, the excitement of the Eatons' delivery van on its rounds, contributing verse to the local newspaper, all images of a genteel era now utterly lost. Quickly, however, the tone darkens. Her beloved father died when she was only 14; and so Joyce and her mother come to live in England at a Cheltenham rooming house complete with a landlady who serves boiled mutton for Sunday lunch! The War matures the patriotic teenager: she serves in the Women's Division of the RCAF at the Directorate of Medical Services in London.

We read of the blitz, of the happy crowds at VE Day, and of an October 1945 muster of the Division in front of The Queen – happily “we didn't make too many mistakes.”

The chief interest of the book, for monarchists, begins as Bryant returns to Canada, is discharged from the RCAF and, living in Ottawa, begins her association with Rideau Hall when her wartime services are recognized by the presentation of the British Empire Medal from Lord Alexander. Four years later, she joins the staff at Government House, as secretary to Major General Letson, Secretary to

the GG. Within a year, the widower Vincent Massey succeeds as Queen's representative – and Joyce Bryant quickly becomes an indispensable part of his support team, spending the next 14 years as his Personal Secretary.

Here follow lovely vignettes of a more gracious – and loyal – and cozy era at a Rideau Hall far smaller staff-wise than today, yet rather more effective at representing the Sovereign in a distinctively Canadian way. We read of happy days touring on the vice-regal train – and of the Mountie scared stiff to be dancing with a member of His Excellency's staff; of missing speech texts, and of Bryant being presented to Princess Marina while trying to conceal a hand that had just been removed from some gooey jam tarts! Mr. Massey's 1957 visit to London to discuss details of the forthcoming Royal tour (can anyone imagine such detailed and loving loyalty nowadays?) results in the author taking 29 pages of dictation from Colonel (later Lord) Charteris at Buckingham Palace.

Curiously, even five years of clearly devoted service did not render Bryant immune from nearly losing her position when one Christmas she omitted to mail Mr. Massey's Christmas cheques to his large staff at the family home, Batterwood, near Port Hope. The story, preceding a wistful comment that occasionally Bryant felt neither fish – domestic staff – nor fowl – invited guest – at a function suggests that perhaps the strain and responsibility of a more formal era weighed heavily upon her conscientious spirit. The distance between master and servant eased once “a terribly lonely” Mr. Massey had retired to Batterwood, where Bryant often would keep him company after work had ended, commenting “we drank a lot of *Tio Pepe*.”

One of several errors characteristic of self-published books comes when Mr. Massey retires at the end of what Bryant dubs his extended “term of

office.” She mentions the story of Prime Minister Diefenbaker refusing the suggestion he should be appointed KG, but unfortunately, she does not add any fresh insight as to the events that ultimately led Her Majesty instead to give Massey the singular honour of the Royal Victorian Chain.

After a few months in a new spot at Rideau Hall – for General Vanier had needed a bilingual secretary – Bryant resumes her role with Mr. Massey and moves to Port Hope. Chief interest of this section of the memoir is Bryant’s tantalizing portrayal of guests who visited the retired Governor. Unfortunately, perhaps, so discreet are her accounts as to rob her tales of the greater interest their expansion would surely hold. All we are told of a stay by The Queen Mother is that talk continued well into the night. The Duke of Edinburgh’s visits are illuminated only by a story told on herself: HRH asked if his handwriting was difficult to transcribe, and roared with laughter when Bryant blurted she had seen much worse! Equally glossed over are the stays of an ageing Anthony Eden and of Mr. Massey’s successor, the much-loved General Vanier.

With Centennial Year came Mr. Massey’s 80th birthday, and an easing of his correspondence. Bryant realized that at 45, she had only a brief window if she wished to return to the civil service. She had read of Prime Minister Pearson’s announcement of a distinctively Canadian Honours system, and so met with Private Secretary Esmond Butler who arranged her return to Rideau Hall as part of the working group bringing into being the Order of Canada. This project was dear to Mr. Massey’s heart, and he had often discussed it with Rideau Hall and the Prime Minister’s office – indeed, under his direction, Bryant had sketched an early version of “The Royal Order of Canada” in 1966. Would that the nomenclature had survived the memoirist’s move back to official Ottawa!

Sadly, Mr. Massey did not live long after his Investiture as one of the first Companions of the Order, held at Rideau Hall on November 24, 1967. During a visit on that occasion, he gave Bryant a 17th century silver tea caddy, and a pair of Sheffield candlesticks as tokens of her long and faithful service. A little more than a month later, he fell ill

and died in London, the end of a loyal and distinguished life also closing a principal leitmotif of the memoir.

Bryant seems more at ease in describing her official work in the 15 years of her second period of employment at Rideau Hall. Self-described “jack of all trades” in the burgeoning Honours Secretariat, she wrote citations, minuted meetings of the Order’s Advisory Council and arranged myriad details surrounding Investiture ceremonies. Forgotten scrolls and reversed lists caused inevitable snafus; more delicate was the occasion where letters to proposed recipients of Medal of Service and Companion of the Order were reversed. Not least of Bryant’s mishaps occurred when some borrowed emerald ear-rings fell into a bowl of Maple Mousse at a post-Investiture buffet!

Invested herself as CM in 1974, Bryant saw the Honours Secretariat physically divorced from Rideau Hall and eventually installed in an anonymous government building. So it was that the Schreyers held a retirement dinner for her and two other departing staffers in late 1981.

However, contract work continued for another decade, one notable and taxing task being organizing files of deceased honours recipients over many years, whose families often wanted the details of a DFC awarded to father, or a MBE presented to a beloved aunt.

Canadians may well be grateful to Bryant for her old-school devotion to the Throne and to her work, even as they might wish she had felt able to take us a little more candidly into the personalities, conflicts and debates of life at Rideau Hall, especially in the wrenching period after Esmond Butler’s abrupt termination and the beginning of politicization and a more impersonal régime. Nonetheless, her memoir provides several beams of daylight onto vice-regal life and concerns, and recounts the modest story of an excellent woman, full of faith in God, of love of family and of an ardent, determined spirit.

At the Memorial Service for Norah Michener, the widowed former Governor General greeted Joyce Bryant, arranging flowers at her beloved St Bartholomew’s prior to the obsequies, by saying “Here is the Order of Canada.” An apt tribute.