

PROFESSOR ANN ROBSON

A Memorial Resolution submitted to the Senate of Victoria University presented by Professor Kenneth Bartlett

Professor AnnProvost (Wilkinson) Robson

2 December 1931 – 3 May 2015

Ann Wilkinson was born in Manchester, England, into a distinguished academic family. Her father was the celebrated British medieval constitutional historian Bertie Wilkinson, who became the founding director of the Centre for Medieval Studies, and her brother, John, became a respected professor of Library Science, at the University of Toronto.

The family moved to Toronto in 1938, where Ann attended Brown School and Havergal College before entering the University of Toronto from which she received her B.A. in History in 1953, immediately followed by an M.A. In 1953 Ann married John (Jack) Robson, who would become a distinguished professor of English at Victoria College.

After her marriage and M.A., Ann returned to England, where she pursued a PhD at the University of London, completing her thesis in 1958 on British Factory Legislation, 1830-1853. It was this work which was to signal the direction of her scholarly interest in Victorian social history and thought.

On returning to Canada, Ann worked briefly at the Universities of British Columbia and Alberta before taking up an appointment as a lecturer in History at the University of Toronto in 1964. Despite not having a full-time appointment, her success as a classroom teacher and her growing research profile resulted in her elevation to an assistant professorship in 1967; in 1977 she became an Associate Professor and in 1988 a full Professor of History. In 1997 Ann was appointed a Professor Emeritus at Victoria College, an inspired moment, as it ensured that Ann would for some years after remain an active member of the Victoria Community.

Ann's work on Victorian social reformers was gaining increasing recognition, with her publications on the early advocate for women's suffrage, Helen Taylor, and on the great figure John Stuart Mill. Although the University of Toronto Mill Project is invariably associated with Jack Robson, everyone knew that Ann's own contributions to the Mill volumes were substantial and rigorous.

Ann's deep commitment to and success in undergraduate teaching first led her to Woodsworth College where she gained a reputation for stimulating interest among students of diverse backgrounds and preparation in the study of History. Subsequently, Ann became a fellow of Victoria College in the 1980s and soon established her place as one of most engaged and popular of Senior Common Room inhabitants, always offering open and delightful conversation on any number of subjects from, naturally, Victorian Britain, to classroom teaching, travel, cottage life and golf; and her forcefully delivered opinions on politics – whether Canadian or university – always stimulated much informed debate. Her quick and insightful wit and her breadth of interest and experience made her a popular member of the Vic community. Whoever found an empty chair at High Table next to Ann felt rewarded and fortunate.

Ann was also a good and committed citizen of Victoria. She worked collegially and energetically on whatever committee she was asked to join. This is especially true of any discussion that concerned teaching and undergraduate education. In 1987-88, Ann was invited to chair a special iteration of the Academic Advisory Committee on the First Year. As with all her responsibilities, she fulfilled her duties with her usual intelligent leadership, spiced with ironic commentary.

Beyond her life at the college, Ann was active in many community organizations both in Toronto, centred on the republic of Rathnelly and the Arts and Letters Club, and at her cottage retreat on Go Home Bay. But it was her family that gave her the greatest joy. Her pride in her children and their families emerged whenever the subject arose. Her conversation consisted of events, humorous stories or charming encounters with her children, their partners and her grandchildren. In balancing her family and her professional life, Ann was a model for women

professors at this university. Her teaching and scholarship were not sacrificed to domestic demands but rather those family responsibilities focused and energized her as a colleague, and provided so much of the joy in life she never failed to display and share.

Madame Chairman, to honour her memory, and in recognition of the dedication and service that Ann Robson rendered to Victoria College, to the department of History, to scholarship and to teaching, I move that this resolution be inscribed in the minutes of the Senate and that a copy be forwarded to her family.

Kenneth Bartlett