

Her Worship. Hazel McCallion and the Development of Mississauga By Tom Urbaniak

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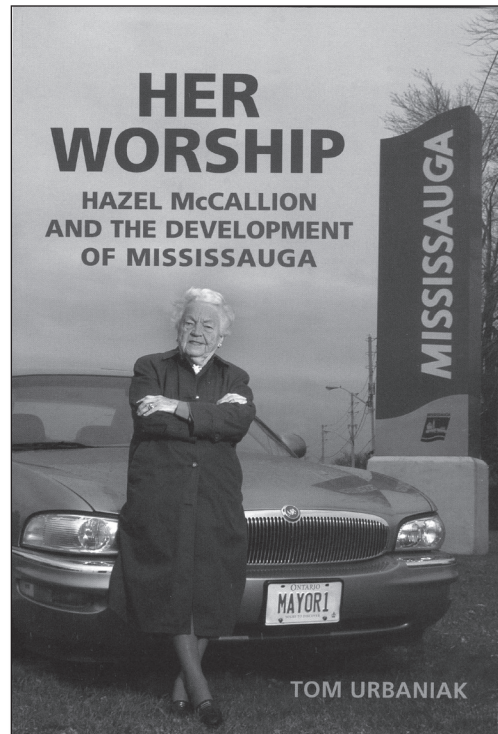
By Tom Urbaniak

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“Think like a man, act like a lady, work like a dog.” – Hazel McCallion

As I write, Hazel McCallion is in hot water. She is accused of an undeclared conflict of interest over a land deal, and the evidence seems damning. Such a misstep could bring down many a mayor, but surely not Hazel. After all, she was found guilty on a similar charge in 1981-82, but this barely dented her popularity. Like President Reagan, only for much longer, Hazel has been the Teflon politician. Why has she been so popular, and durable: elected as mayor of Streetsville in 1970, of Mississauga in 1978, and never beaten—indeed barely challenged—since? This question guides *Her Worship*, Tom Urbaniak’s solid political biography of one of Canada’s leading municipal politicians in the postwar era.

Urbaniak tells a straightforward story, beginning with McCallion’s early years in Port-Daniel West, on the south shore of the Gaspé. Her parents’ kitchen table offered the ideal nourishment for her later, long career: solid fare (no junk food), spiced with political discussion. Urbaniak follows her into the Anglican Young People’s Association and then into the workforce, as she rises to office manager for an engineering company, which helped bring her to the Township of Toronto in 1951. In 1968 this Township was to become the Town of Mississauga and then, in 1974, after being amalgamated



with Streetsville and Port Credit, the City. Meanwhile McCallion had become active in the civic arena. Joining the Streetsville Chamber of Commerce in 1962, within a year she was its president. In 1965 she was asked to join as a volunteer member of the local Planning Board; within a year she was its chair, and by the end of the decade she was Streetsville’s mayor. Although she at first resisted its amalgamation in 1974, she learned to accept, and then embrace, the inevitable. Her rise to municipal power, then, is attributable to the qualities that have kept her there: ambition, hard work, pragmatism, and grass-roots networking.

Because of McCallion’s political longevity, she has contradicted herself. Her biggest decision was to sponsor resolutions 594 and 595 in November 1981. These required developers, even Mississauga’s big three (Markborough, E.P.Taylor, and

McLaughlin), to pay all costs of land development, including soft as well as hard costs. This appeared progressive, but carried an unfortunate *quid pro quo*. Companies could develop whatever land they owned, regardless of location, and this produced sprawl. In the short run, the City benefited, but in the long term it was saddled with the costs of maintaining and servicing a low-density built environment. By the mid-1990s, McCallion realized this. “We are creating a monster,” she declared (p. 194), and gave her support to Smart Growth strategies then becoming fashionable. Was this a cynical flip-flop, a sensible adaptation to new circumstances, or a sign that she has always thought too little of the future? Probably all three. Certainly, and very plausibly, Urbaniak argues that McCallion remains a scrapper, rather than a stateswoman who can rise above the day-to-day affray. Regardless, no one could accuse her of sticking obstinately to an outmoded vision.

Urbaniak does a workmanlike job of recounting McCallion’s reversal on the issue of sprawl, as he does of telling the story of lesser initiatives and battles. There is a fund of information here and, as far as I can tell, he is a reliable and fair-minded guide. The author of a previous book about Streetsville, Urbaniak is well-placed to ground McCallion’s career in its local context. He attributes her dominance of Mississauga’s scene in part to the character of the place. Sprawl, he suggests, helped diffuse grass-roots opposition; the presence of only a single daily newspaper allowed McCallion to get away with missteps. (It helped that most

of the City-of-Toronto-centred media—newspapers, radio, and TV alike—took little interest in merely suburban matters.) Urbaniak also makes telling points about how sprawl encouraged separate subdivisions to turn against one another, as each worked to deflect development elsewhere. Despite the book’s subtitle, the interplay of place and personality never quite rises to the status of a fully-developed theme, but there is material here to interest those with broader interests in urban politics. Similarly, there are scattered asides about how McCallion’s gender affected her electoral prospects. Mostly for the better, it seems. In an early campaign, for example, Urbaniak suggests that old guard politicians were reluctant to land low blows on a woman candidate. (p. 92)

But broader judgments of this kind are fragmentary. Urbaniak sticks close to his evidence. As a result, *Her Worship* will appeal primarily to those who have a serious interest in Mississauga, its celebrated mayor, and the roots of Toronto’s sprawl. The story that it tells, of the development and politics of a postwar suburb, has a wider resonance, but it will be the work of some other scholar to make the wider comparisons and underline the general lessons.

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