

Justice for Equality

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Constance Backhouse, [Claire L'Heureux-Dubé: A Life](#) (2017).

Claire L'Heureux-Dubé was Canada's second woman to join our Supreme Court of Canada. She was famous for her strong personality, her charm, her directness, and eventually her willingness to dissent. She was loved by some, loathed by others.

My opening paragraph so dramatically understates the significance of Justice L'Heureux- Dubé. It pretends that the life of one woman – a woman who faced substantial personal and professional challenges – can be adequately captured in a few words.

Enter Constance Backhouse's brilliant biography. Biography is an art. How to render a person visible? To be appropriately honest about her failings and reflective about her successes? To situate her life within its broad context – social, political, economic, and scientific? To reflect her social character – her relationships and the effects of those relationships on the path of her life?

Backhouse's considerable work answers these questions.

In over 700 meticulously researched pages, she takes us on a magnificent journey. For those who love reading about "formative years," five early chapters are devoted to tracing L'Heureux-Dubé's family heritage and early education. The chapters give us a sense of everything from L'Heureux-Dubé's early years with a lively and cheerful mother to school under the tutelage of nuns to the impact of the mighty St. Lawrence River on the development of sense of her place in the world.

The next part of the book turns to L'Heureux-Dubé's legal education and life in practice. As one of the earliest women law graduates, L'Heureux-Dubé confronted resistance at each stage of her career because of her sex. Her father did not support her educational and career choices, she was excluded from scholarships, she faced sexual harassment in the workplace. Yet, she prevailed and through force of will found herself a mother of two children and a leading member of the Quebec City bar.

On to her time at the courts. The book takes us through L'Heureux-Dubé's contributions at the Quebec Superior Court, the Quebec Court of Appeal, and finally the Supreme Court of Canada. L'Heureux-Dubé's widely acknowledged work ethic shines through, as do the ways her fortitude was tested by exclusion from the "inner club" of largely male lawyers and judges and the pressures of a particularly demanding set of family circumstances.

These opening twenty-eight chapters (in a book with thirty-eight chapters) are gorgeously written with specificity that leaves the reader feeling like she is standing right beside L'Heureux-Dubé as her life unfolds. That's credit to Backhouse's use of detail, her reliance on hundreds and hundreds of hours of interviews with L'Heureux-Dubé and those who know her, and her fierce analytical skill, which renders plain the subtle.

Unconventionally, but useful especially to the legally trained reader, the biography then looks carefully at six of Justice L'Heureux-Dubé's Supreme Court of Canada decisions – decisions she rendered on

sexual assault, spousal support, human rights for same-sex couples, tax law, Quebec secession, and immigration. These decisions are presented as signature moments in Justice L'Heureux-Dubé's self-expression. Backhouse situates each decision in its broader social context. Each of these last six chapters has its own story to tell and each should be included in any course materials that include the underlying decision. Each is dazzling.

When the biography ended, after a couple of chapters that explore the effect of Justice L'Heureux-Dubé and her work on Canadian justice and the international legal scene, I felt bereft. I longed for the book to continue. Not because anything was missing, but because reading the book was such a pleasure. The book is more than a biography of an extraordinary woman authored by an extraordinary woman; it is a story about the way justice reflects our lives and about how our lives are lived in the space of the possibilities justice presents, and sometimes denies.

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