

Gaudeamus Igitur: Some Recent University Histories

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Some Recent University Histories

UNIVERSITY HISTORIES COME IN MANY FORMS. There is the genre of pious incompetence, well-meaning, reverential monuments built with scrupulous devotion but unskilled hands. A few pallid pictures may feebly hint at past glories. Alumni will buy books such as these, but mercifully they can soon be forgotten. Best left nameless, their basic decrepitude is soon recognizable. There are others, not that different in appearance, that are in effect the opposite: the scholarly beginning of something important. An obvious example is D.C. Harvey's *Introduction to the History of Dalhousie University* (Halifax, 1938), its excellence the true measure of Harvey's scholarship.

Between these are the main varieties, usually scholarly in fundamentals, wrought with care and persistence, but not always that readable. The University of British Columbia published its history, *Tuum Est* (Vancouver, 1958), but it was too much a compendium. Though handsomely illustrated and produced — many university histories are — it was interminable in its list of departments opened, institutes begun, faculties and facilities expanded, and, especially, the new buildings. Oh, the buildings! Architects designed them in Scottish Baronial, High School Eclectic, Greek Revival, Cement Mixer Globular; there they stand, as if alive. Histories of universities can be like that, empty buildings, blocks of structures, though tracing in their architecture and development the history of the institution that built them. Such histories lack the smells of universities, books, chalk dust and formaldehyde, bereft of the bustle and energy of students.

On student life there are some excellent scholarly articles, newly minted, in Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid's *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), and the important prototype, Paul Axelrod's "Moulding the Middle Class: Student Life at Dalhousie University in the 1930s", in *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 84-122. We have as yet no popular equivalent of R.J. White's delightful *Cambridge Life* (London, 1960), or Dacre Balsdon's *Oxford Life* (London, 1962).

University history is apt to be whatever those who write it think it is. *The Achievement and Challenge: The University of Guelph 1964-1989* (Guelph, University of Guelph, 1989) is a mixture of an alumni magazine, fund-raising pamphlet and a picture book. One ought not to condemn it for not being what it never set out to be; but Guelph, a university that has in its short time produced some singular departures in self-advertising, has essayed another.

It must be admitted that university history presents difficulties: between the general and the particular, the institutional and the personal, the financial and the social, the administrative and the informal, to name only four polarities. The sheer size and complexity of the present University of Toronto makes writing an

effective, scholarly history of it an intractable, perhaps impossible, task. Nevertheless, disparate worlds do meet and must function together: students, faculty, governors and administrative officers. They do pull different ways, have different interests, and they all have memories, some of them long.

The students are at the most vulnerable and sentimental stage of their lives: universities do not always readily admit it, but on campuses the awakening of a love of learning is not infrequently accompanied, sometimes overwhelmed by, learning of love. The two inform the other: the great reaches of English poetry and literature, to say nothing of French and German, can be an ascending double helix of exaltation. There is hardly a university student whose life and study has not been affected, sometimes permanently, by love and learning, all together. There is a little poem about this from the University of Aberdeen:

When I was a begent [freshman],
A beardless young begent,
And you wore a tassel of blue,
I toyed with my Latin
And played with my Greek
But all that I studied was you.¹

University authorities, academic and administrative, must, of course, contain such wicked excitements as much as possible. The mix is explosive enough: young men and young women for four years in close proximity to each other, in lectures, study, sport. This is usually impossible to document, and university histories do not as a rule take much account of it. They can't. But they might be a little more aware that it exists, and not write as if nothing were going on *sub rosa*, either metaphorically or literally.

Of course, there are easier forms of documentation readily available. Universities thrive on records, and the institutional archives on which these university histories are based deal mainly with what might be called more important things, with structures, finance, administration, the very foundations necessary to the existence of the university itself. This is quite proper; the place must exist before students can come to it. A university is not easily created, not at least in the 19th century, and even once created, a university's survival need not be taken for granted. Probably the longest journey a university can take is from its charter to its 50th anniversary.

It is not surprising that university histories should indulge themselves, substantially, even heavily, in the story of their own creation, the rationale for

1 This poem was recited by Sheriff Nigel Thomson, at a dinner in Edinburgh, 8 May 1988, and the text made available by Professor Henry Best at Laurentian University.

their continued existence, comprehending the buildings where were classes and courses, debates and dances. Most of the university histories under review suffer a little, one way or the other, from this sometimes stern institutional bias. It may be inevitable, even justifiable: stone by stone, brick by brick, professor by professor, the universities were slowly and painfully created, most of the ones here, certainly, in a colonial environment in which savings — capital — were hard to come by, an environment perhaps even hostile to the learning that universities stood for. The practical necessities of science, law and medicine, those came to be understood and accepted; what saved the 19th century colleges from the rootless vulgarity of the practical, made them establish arts classes with real intellectual rigour, was the Church, however fractured and refractory some of its denominations may have been. The Protestant Churches, especially the Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists, needed ministers to read and interpret the Bible and to teach the sophisticated ramifications of their theologies. A university history is thus also an exercise in religious history, not less valuable for that.

Most of these recent histories are not, generally, books to take too far from the study, unless one is a positive monster for academic truth. Our authors are divided between the young and energetic and the old and retiring (or retired). Some of the work of the younger men is very good. G. Edward MacDonald's *The History of St. Dunstan's University, 1855-1956* (Charlottetown, P.E.I. Museum and Heritage Foundation, 1989) was his Ph.D. thesis for Queen's. He is only 32 years old. His book on St. Dunstan's is a work of filial piety much better than such enterprises usually are. The discipline of the Queen's Ph.D. undoubtedly helped. MacDonald's *St. Dunstan's* shows how difficult it was to create any college out of the savings so hard to put together in colonial society. St. Dunstan's was for a time subsidized by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, in Rome. What could not be written in the St. Dunstan's history was the period from 1956 to 1969, the years of the final struggle between St. Dunstan's and Prince of Wales College, with the government of Prince Edward Island being finally forced to make the hard decision. Neither institution liked the idea of a University of Prince Edward Island; Frank MacKinnon of Prince of Wales called it a shotgun marriage, Prince of Wales being sold shamelessly to the Roman Catholics; St. Dunstan's believed it had hopelessly compromised the Roman Catholic tradition in allowing U.P.E.I. That part of the story has been told by one of the Royal commission members who helped engineer the shotgun marriage, Larry MacKenzie, former President of U.B.C. He was not the Chairman but he was its most important member. Larry MacKenzie, and the powerful, behind-the-scenes advice of Vincent Bladen of the University of Toronto, did it.²

2 See P.B. Waite, *Lord of Point Grey: Larry MacKenzie of UBC* (Vancouver, 1987), pp. 198-200.

John Reid's *Mount Allison: A History, to 1963* (2 vols., Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984) was published when he was 36 years old. Reid was an imaginative choice by Mount Allison; they wanted a good history, and one that would not take two decades to produce. The idea was proposed in 1978 and the two volumes were out within six years, covering Mount Allison's history from 1843 to 1963. It is a fine piece of work, well researched, briskly written, with ample and useful statistics. It is not without touches of humour: a music student, already enrolled at Acadia University, was enticed by a large scholarship to Mount Allison. President Watson Kirkconnell of Acadia wrote to his fellow president, Ross Flemington, at Mount Allison more in sorrow than in anger, 2 April 1949. Kirkconnell was confident that Flemington himself "would not willingly be a party to stealing a fat sheep who had already been branded. All lambs are in the public domain" (II, p. 221). There is some irony in Kirkconnell's saying so. Other Maritime universities suspected Acadia of being the most energetic in the ignoble hunt for students. Mount Allison also had suspicions of Halifax, of those "long-headed Presbyterians" at Pine Hill with that too easy connection along the North-West Arm to Dalhousie University. These and other adventures of Mount Allison on the Tantramar are retailed with vivacity and a decent evenhandedness that well becomes a young and vigorous historian. Altogether Reid's *Mount Allison* is a sterling performance, a little like Mount Allison itself. One's only question — and in the light of everything said above, it may be unfair — might it have been possible to bring it all within the compass of a single volume? For the history of one fairly small institution from 1843 to 1963, 660 pages of text and 132 pages of notes is a fairly hefty bite. McGill manages with 10 per cent less, from 1801 to 1971.

McGill University: For the Advancement of Learning (2 vols., Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980, 1984), written by Stanley Brice Frost, a Professor of Old Testament Language and Literature, was started when Frost was retiring as Vice-Principal of McGill. It has been well received by McGill's friends and graduates, and it is indeed worthy of it. Polished and well designed, *McGill* comes with its foundations well in place, and with a strong ring of authority about it. There is some discussion of McGill's formal and legal structure that other scholars, less familiar with tables of stone, might have avoided. But Frost's foundations give the book solidity and strength; it stands up well to wind, weather and critics. The concomitant, however, of Frost's interest in structures and institutions, in process so to speak, is thinness on what might be called the social history of McGill. Professor Frost has some interesting sections on McGill's relations with francophone Quebec, and a vivacious discussion on the Students for a Democratic Society of the 1960s, both of which show what he can do when he wants to. However, an impression has been left, perhaps the result of a plethora of material, of buildings and benefactors more than of professors and students. In a book that covers so much ground, putting in the academic and legal foundations as it goes, this emphasis may be inevitable.

And McGill University Press have produced a handsome book, a joy to handle and to behold.

Charles Johnston's *McMaster University: Vol. 1, The Toronto Years* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1976) and *Vol. 2, The Early Years in Hamilton, 1930-1957* (1981) is also in two volumes but with a different emphasis. Like Mount Allison, McMaster was a denominational college; but the Methodists seem to have given freer rein to Mount Allison than did the Baptists to McMaster. And the Baptists also seem to have revelled more in the delights of factional infelicities. Denominational prejudice was the security of the ignorant, as one McMaster alumnus ruefully noted. There might be more real morality in a university untutored by the luxury of denominational prejudices. And was it necessary to have "a big Baptist university" squarely on Bloor Street, Toronto? Federation with the University of Toronto would have been simple to do and easy to justify.

The idea of a Baptist university was saved as much by its love of learning as by the dedication of its Baptist prejudices. All the denominational colleges, Queen's, Acadia, Mount Allison, had difficulties with the fact that their original support was a strong religious constituency; but none of them enjoyed quite the feuds that McMaster had. McMaster went through a more than usually difficult confrontation between fundamentalism and modernism, which the Scropes trial in Tennessee brought so dramatically into the open in 1925. "O its's a lovely war!" is Charles Johnson's imaginative title for the chapter on the bitter internecine battle waged by T.T. Shields and his fundamentalist primitives, against the modernists and moderates that supported McMaster. Thomas Todhunter Shields (1873-1955), the self-educated and polemical pastor of Jarvis Street Baptist church in Toronto, fought McMaster and its Chancellor, H.P. Whidden, a Nova Scotian out of Acadia and McMaster and Chicago, over the wickedness of Darwinian evolution. The Toronto newspapers had a field day with this Ontario version of the Scropes trial, the war between Jarvis Street and Bloor Street. The move to Hamilton was a product of McMaster alumni in Hamilton. There had been talk of a new site for McMaster in North Toronto on Eglinton Avenue, and one was even bought; but the pull of Hamilton developed steadily, aided by the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce and even more by the knowledge that there was a substantial constituency of moderate Baptists west of Hamilton. Best of all, in Hamilton McMaster would be further from the pernicious competition of the University of Toronto and the forensic shafts of T.T. Shields.

Queen's had once considered moving to Toronto, a move that the government of the 1850s had encouraged. In many ways the Queen's history is the noblest effort of all of them. Queen's chose a scholar wholly unconnected with the university, a stranger to Kingston and those strong Queen's traditions, Hilda Neatby of the University of Saskatchewan. All she had in common with Queen's was Calvinism. She was 64 when she started work in July 1970 and continued virtually full-time (except for an annual course of lectures) until the summer of

1973 when she was taken ill. By that time she had most of the first volume in draft. After her death in 1975, it was finished by Roger Graham and Frederick Gibson, eds., *Queen's University, Vol. I, 1841-1917: to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield* (Montreal, McGill Queen's University Press, 1978).

Hilda Neatby's book shows the dogged determination of a strong but increasingly ailing academic to do her duty. There are few flashes of humour; one might venture the unkind thought that grit is no substitute for wit. It is sad to have to record that that illness did not, at any rate, conduce to good writing. This is not Hilda Neatby at her best, and there was not much her two talented editors could have done about that, short of a complete re-writing.

How successful that might have been is made clear in Frederick Gibson's splendid second volume, *Queen's University, Vol. II, 1917-1961: to serve and yet be free* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983). For panache, style, charm, it is the best of the university histories under review. Colleagues have been saying for years that there was a great book coming from Frederick Gibson one of these days; it was to have been *Canada 1922-1939*, so announced in the early 1960s; there were other suggestions as well. *Queen's* Vol. II makes up for all anticipations. It is not only great history; it is the writing of a wise and sensible man, who is willing to share his innate good sense. Gibson's reflections on individuals, presidents, students, professors, show what a wonderful canvas a university really is. One sample of his writing, on the effect of the Cold War on Campus political debate:

At Queen's, it was apparent, interest in political activity had waned since the immediate postwar years: the Public Affairs Club was dead, the International Relations Club was dying, the Debating Union moribund, and the Mock Parliament reduced at length to flippant exercises in electing or, more frequently, defeating those who presented themselves as "Communist" candidates (p. 409).

He offers a perceptive portrait of a wonderful Queen's Principal, J.A. Corry (1961-1968) and it is a fair sample of the quality of the book as a whole: "The provision of professional technical education, he [Corry] said repeatedly, was not the main function of the universities: it is rather the protecting and nourishing of the traditions of civility on which all civilization in the end depends" (p. 428).

Corry it was, I think, who, with his wry smile, one day announced that there was a collective noun for a group of principals and deans: "a *lakh* of principles". He was an exception to that rule, as he was to many. His was a finer-grained mind than George M. Grant's (1877-1902) but in the straightened and tightening conditions that attend administrations of modern universities, he could do only a lot less.

There was, once, something to be said for basing university history on presidents.

As Gibson observes of Queen's, "good government began in the principal's office" (p. 429). It bears out an old Russian proverb: "the footsteps of the *barin* cultivate the soil". But then that was the world of the 1950s, before faculty associations and faculty committees clogged the forthrightness of decision-making, good and bad, by presidents. Some measure of the difference between the 1950s and afterward is a 1961 dialogue between John Barfoot MacDonald, the incoming UBC president, and Larry MacKenzie, the outgoing one. MacDonald asked, "Can a university president ever *do* anything? Can he effect changes, or is he simply an administrator?" To that Larry MacKenzie had a robust answer. "The person who sits in this chair", he said, "is one of the most powerful people in Canada". Given the way Larry MacKenzie had used that chair, from 1944 to 1962, John Barfoot MacDonald was inclined to think Larry was right.³ But it is a dialogue that goes on forever: what *is* action? Is individual action even possible? For one answer, see Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *passim*.

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3 Interview with John Barfoot MacDonald, 3 October 1985 in Toronto, cited *ibid.*, p. 162.