

The Chiefs, Warriors and Cadets of Academe: Recent Writings on Canadian Higher Education

Charles M. Johnston

Volume 22, numéro 1, autumn 1992

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad22_1re04

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Johnston, C. M. (1992). The Chiefs, Warriors and Cadets of Academe:: Recent Writings on Canadian Higher Education. *Acadiensis*, 22(1), 190–198.

The Chiefs, Warriors and Cadets of Academe: Recent Writings on Canadian Higher Education

ONCE UPON A TIME there were two Franks. One, born into the respectable middle class of Montreal, lived his whole life as Frank and appeared happy with that. The other, English-born in modest circumstances, ditched Frank and opted instead for Cyril — his middle name — and was exceedingly happy with that, particularly when it meant that the tonier Cyril went down well with the American academic community, at least that part of it known as the University of Pennsylvania, where Frank-cum-Cyril was once employed. (When I was a graduate student at Penn some ten years later I was struck by the warmth of its response to all things English, so nothing had changed.)

The durable Frank was Francis Reginald Scott, the poet, political activist and ultimately dean of the McGill Law School, a post long denied him by a paranoiac board of governors, who feared his unsettling left-wing ventures into the world beyond the ivory tower. But that same board of governors found little to fault in F. (for Frank) Cyril James who, after a stint at Penn's Wharton School of Business, was in 1939 offered a position to head up the commerce department at McGill, and then speedily elevated to its principalship under the aegis of the admiring chancellor, Sir Edward Beatty. And small wonder. James' conservative views on economic and fiscal matters, his impeccable articulateness and his capacity for swift decision-making, not to mention his dapper and reassuring presence, made a profound impression on the businessmen-board members who wished to enhance McGill's reputation in the Depression thirties. And as Sandra Djwa's wide-ranging biography of Frank R. Scott — *The Politics of the Imagination: A Life of F.R. Scott* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1987) — makes clear, James fully shared the board's view that a faculty member's political activities, particularly if they were leftist, as Scott's were, should be resolutely discouraged for fear they would destabilize the university. Clearly this did not make for a happy relationship between the two men.

There is no explicit reference to this in Stanley Brice Frost's biography of Cyril James, *The Man in the Ivory Tower: F. Cyril James of McGill* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), an otherwise edifying follow-up to his vibrant two-volume history of McGill. When the book does refer to Scott it is sometimes patronizing, and on one occasion incorrect, identifying him as R.F. Scott (tantamount to talking about J.E. Pratt or P.C. Snow). And when Frost does note Scott's resistance to the Duplessis "despotism" in Quebec, when most people at McGill were prepared to accept it in silence, including James presumably, he avoids any mention of Scott's success in unlocking the premier's notorious Padlock Law, which had been directed ostensibly against Communist activity in the province. (My only encounter with Scott was at Duke University where he came to address an enthusiastic colloquium in the summer of 1957, just a few months after his triumph against Duplessis. I easily recall his hosts' delight and the wittily self-effacing way he dealt with issues both at the formal sessions and at the festivities that followed. This is the very sort of ambience that Djwa captures so effectively in her biography.)

Charles M. Johnston, "The Chiefs, Warriors and Cadets of Academe: Recent Writings on Canadian Higher Education", *Acadiensis*, XXII, 1 (Autumn 1992), pp. 190-198.

There are a number of parallels between the lives and careers of the two Franks and they are inferentially alluded to by both Frost and Djwa. Apart from the McGill connection, there was the national and international prominence they achieved in their respective spheres and, on the down-side, the marital difficulties that frequently beset both men during their middle-age crises, a touchy subject that is fully and frankly aired by the two biographers. Scott and James could also put on formidable displays of arrogance when confronted with intrusions upon their perceived turfs. James' jealous guarding of his rights and privileges against both governors and faculty associations, and Scott's off-putting behaviour when he finally did scale the decanal summit in 1961, are clear cases in point. (Perhaps we should be indebted to those persons who for so long denied Scott that feat. Otherwise we might not have been treated to his soaring literary and courtroom accomplishments.) But, as already intimated, there the similarities between the two men come to an abrupt end.

After reading Djwa's work and aware of what was already known about Scott's views, one cannot, for example, imagine him proposing that when it came to the granting of student deferments in wartime, the humanities should not receive the same preferential treatment as the more war-oriented engineering and science programmes. James did exactly that at the low point of the Second World War in concert with another British-born academic head, R.C. Wallace of Queen's. The upshot was that James and those who thought like him were accused of trying to "close the liberal arts faculties down" out of respect for the supposed manpower needs of the country. Although Frost bravely tries to exonerate James of the worst of the charge, there is little question that McGill's principal was yielding to a panic situation contrived by a confused federal bureaucracy at the expense of those very academic disciplines that are the life blood of a university. And this is precisely what James' critics such as McMaster's Watson Kirkconnell seized upon in their heated reaction to the proposal and which led to its rejection and the speedy organization of the Humanities Research Council. For Frost to suggest that somebody like Kirkconnell took up the cudgels merely to defend his own vested interests, or that James and his cohort had a clearer view of the national interest than their fellow university heads, is ludicrous.

The way this episode is dealt with betrays a basic weakness of Frost's biography. Although he gamely tries to present a balanced picture he all too often lapses into a state of worshipfulness, particularly when he deals with James' almost endless overseas junkets on behalf of higher education and his own reputation. To be fair, there is a trace of this in Djwa's study of Scott as well. But perhaps hers was in a sense the easier task because Scott, the civil libertarian and campaigner against injustice, is a far more sympathetic figure than the authoritarian and frequently pompous James; there is as a result little need to gild the Scott lily. To make matters worse for the James biographer, while Scott was settling down to enjoy his new responsibilities as dean of law, the principal was more or less being given the academic equivalent of the bum's rush by a critical McGill board. A far cry from 1939.

James had long been saddled with another problem that may have had a bearing on his fall from glory: he never really ceased being an emigrant. Consequently, he often failed to come to terms with all the nuances of the Canadian environment and

continued to perceive most situations, including wartime, largely through English eyes. This alone sets Cyril James off sharply from Frank Scott. Though the latter would eventually adopt a marked internationalist tone, much of his life was devoted to explaining his native country to himself and his fellow Canadians, and to any foreigners who were prepared to listen. Mindful of the carnage of the First World War, which had destroyed his brother, and like other vocal isolationists of the 1930s, Scott was understandably loath to see Canada embroiled in another war that would in his view only entrench the worst features of imperialism and further erode the democratic ethic, always a major concern for this intellectual co-founder of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation. In spite of the “great adventure” of his Rhodes Scholar experience, which had brought him in touch with the finer aspects of British life, he was repelled by the darker side of Empire and by those vagaries of British politics that had led to the abandonment of the democratic cause in the Spanish Civil War.

But when the CCF had to address the issue of whether Canada should go to war at Britain’s side in September 1939, Scott broke with the pacifism of J.S. Woodsworth and, holding his nose, accepted Canada’s intervention on the grounds that Nazism posed a greater threat to democracy than the iniquities of the British Empire. That Scott and others should have come so late to this reasonably obvious conclusion speaks volumes for the myopia that characterized the outlook of otherwise intelligent and perceptive Canadians of that generation. It is almost as unwelcome to contemplate as the other extreme: the tribal ready-aye-ready response of so many of their unthinking compatriots. In any case, Djwa does not pause to comment all that much on the shortcomings of isolationism and the failure of its articulate supporters to appreciate the stark realities of European politics on the eve of war.

Having said this, let me say that it was a good thing that a scholar of Djwa’s interests and qualifications, rather than, say, an historian or a political scientist, tackled the Scott biography. The ease and dexterity with which she handles the inspiration and texture of Scott’s poetry and the contributions of friends and fellow poets such as A.J.M. Smith and Louis Dudek would have been beyond the reach of somebody not immersed in the artistic context and dimension of his career. But it goes beyond this. As Djwa makes abundantly plain, the poetic cannot be divorced from the political and ideological if Frank Scott is to be truly understood. Nor do those two non-artistic factors, or the historical context generally, suffer at the hands of this literary critic. Her treatment appears for the most part to be both reliable and relevant.

Whatever their differences in content and emphasis, both of these well-written and thoughtful biographies share one vital element: they provide important insights into the institution that their subjects illuminated by their varied activities. Much the same can be said for Robert H. Blackburn’s study of the University of Toronto Library, *Evolution of the Heart: A History of the University of Toronto Library up to 1981* (Toronto, University of Toronto Library, 1989). It is also a reminder that the library’s parent has not yet received the kind of treatment that, for example, Stanley Brice Frost lavished on McGill. Not that no attempt has been made in this direction. Some years ago Robin Harris set about the task, but pleading the difficulty of coping with the complexity of what essentially has become a “multiversity” he put the

operation on hold. However, the materials he had already assembled have been placed at the disposal of others so that studies can be undertaken on more manageable campus operations, in the hope that when the general history is reactivated they can be melded into a comprehensive overview of the university's past.

This is where Blackburn's study so neatly comes in. As this former Toronto librarian stresses, and as every humanist and social scientist appreciates, a university library, as his title proclaims, lies at the very heart of the institution it serves. At the turn of the century, a predecessor in the office, Hugh Langton, reinforced the notion by speaking of the library not only as a repository for existing knowledge, but also as a laboratory for enterprising arts scholars bent on their own research, perceived to be clearly equal to whatever the newly emergent scientists were already dramatically accomplishing in their own mysterious realm. But all too often from Langton's day to Blackburn's this role was sadly misunderstood. Even otherwise kindly disposed members of the campus community condescendingly regarded the library as simply another department when the allocation of resources or the hiring of staff came up for discussion; the kind of people who, according to an exasperated Stewart Wallace, Blackburn's immediate predecessor, would not know a library from an umbrella stand. Nor were matters helped when librarians were habitually ranked behind associate professors and given salaries below those of assistant professors.

The deployment of telling anecdotes and a liberal use of diary and memoir, along with more conventional documentation, not to mention a brisk style and a keen appreciation of the ironic, go a long way toward enlivening what might otherwise have been a dry-as-dust account. And despite its subtitle, *A History...*, this is very much a personal account, a memoir in its own right and all the better for that. Through Wallace and the aging Langton, Blackburn, who became the former's assistant after the Second World War and chief librarian in 1954, had learned first-hand of the facility's history, traditions and architectural evolution, particularly the facts and mythology surrounding the Great Fire of 1890, which had destroyed the original library in University College. From this kind of contemplation he was rudely thrust into a series of sweeping developments that affected not only his own responsibilities but the campus at large. These included the enrolment explosion of the 1960s, the change in the governance of the U of T, the student unrest of the 1970s — which, among other things, undercut the library's right to determine who should be given full access to its stacks — the planning and construction of the monumental showplace of the postwar generation, the Robarts Library, and, finally, the severe cutbacks that marred the closing months of his administration. Blackburn writes of all of these with verve and feeling, so much so that the rancour aroused in him by the radical student actions of a generation ago has little difficulty breaking the surface.

Understandably there is much else in this account aimed at the professional — on, for example, classification systems, cataloguing and collections, not all of which, presented as they are in technical language replete with statistics, will be equally gripping to that creature known as the general reader. Even so, *Evolution of the Heart* (like the recently published history of University College, *A Not Unsignificantly*

*Building*¹) is a worthy microcosmic contribution to the growing body of published materials on the U of T's past.

When Hugh Langton compared the arts scholar's work in the library with the scientist's in the lab, he may not have anticipated the day when a history of science — in this case Yves Gingras' *Physics and the Rise of Scientific Research in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, Peter Keating, trans.) — would find its way to the shelves. It is high time that such a work appeared, particularly one that seeks to trace the rise of a disciplinary professionalism in the scientific community. According to Gingras' formula, which depends heavily on sociological models, this process began in Canada with the emergence of university-based scientists who were no longer primarily teachers in the old liberal tradition but full-fledged researchers. It continued with the institutionalization of research by means of which the new breed of professors could create the proper conditions for reproducing their own kind, a prerequisite for the formation of a national scientific community. Once this was achieved the members of that community could enjoy "social visibility" and go about mobilizing and defending their interests, in much the same way as the Humanities Research Council did in less pleasant wartime conditions. But there is, Gingras points out, a further differentiation: between those research physicists belonging to the disciplinary club and their brethren beyond the "ivory lab" who organized themselves into a corporate or professional body. A section of his book is taken up with the conflicts and rivalry that sometimes soured the relations between the disciplinary and corporate groups.

Gingras' most enlightening section explains how the discipline entrenched its interests and promoted its cause through such media as the Royal Society of Canada and the *Canadian Journal of Research*, a precursor of the *Canadian Journal of Physics* founded in 1951. Lamentably, 40 years on that latter publication, once the pride of those who made submissions to it, is in deep trouble over a controversial and allegedly unscientific article it chose to publish on feminism's supposed shortcomings.

Gingras naturally pays much attention to the leaders in the Canadian field such as J.C. McLennan, who founded the so-called Toronto school of physics, and the British-born Ernest Rutherford, who for some nine years pursued his groundbreaking work in radioactivity at McGill. But the author is reluctant, for reasons not given, to enlarge on what the two men were specifically up to in their respective labs; in Rutherford's case, the reader is merely referred to works on the great man. At any rate, both scientists did much to create that cadre of research physicists who went on to fashion over time what was so much sought after: a visible and articulate scientific community in Canada.

External stimuli are not ignored either. We learn, for example, that when theoretical physics and quantum mechanics were virtually uncultivated in Canada, J.S. Foster at McGill had to rely on the expertise of the Danish physicist, Niels Bohr. But left unmentioned is another McGill-Bohr connection, albeit indirect: Rutherford's chance encounter with Bohr in 1911, after the former had left McGill,

1 Douglas Richardson, et al., *A Not Unseen Building: University College and its History* (Oakville, Ont., 1990).

which led to the creation of the so-called Bohr-Rutherford model of the nucleus based on the quantum interpretation. Also by-passed is the work in physics undertaken in Ontario outside the scientific precincts of McGill, Toronto and Queen's. To cite one case: there is a casual reference or two to McMaster's H.F. Dawes, but no mention is made of the postwar work of Martin Johns in electromagnetic theory and nuclear physics at that institution.

While there is much to praise in this pioneering study, there is also much to complain about beyond what has already been noted. In many places it is awkwardly written and all too often burdened with sociological jargon. (Perhaps we could be merciful and say that the original text suffered at the hands of the translator or editor or both.) The author also overuses favourite buzzwords, the worst miscreant being "trajectory". It is fired off so often — on one occasion twice on the same page — that I felt trapped on some First World War battlefield. In places the historical context of social, economic and political factors is only sketchily presented, and the nature of varied experiments given little descriptive or analytical follow-up. This may be sufficient for the knowledgeable insider, but for this layman such items were virtually unintelligible. This is a pity, for I am sure that the work was designed for readers other than paid-up members of the scientific community.

The discussion so far has centred on the view from the principal's or librarian's office, and the activities of those who directed the course of their students' careers. But what about the part played by students themselves in shaping the system of higher education in Canada? Quite frequently when institutional histories are written the undergraduate is side-lined in favour of "higher academe". Fortunately that imbalance is now being corrected by a fresh crop of historians represented by the likes of Paul Axelrod, author of *Making a Middle Class: Student Life in English Canada During the Thirties* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) and Malcolm MacLeod, who has written *A Bridge Built Halfway: A History of Memorial University College, 1925-1950* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). Both extend the work of John G. Reid, whose well-received history of Mount Allison² pointed the way to how the study of student activities could shed important light upon university affairs.

Founded as a First World War memorial in 1925, MUC arose out of a determination on the part of the government and the diverse denominations in the country — Anglican, Roman Catholic and varying species of Protestantism — to create a non-sectarian institution that would preclude the costly alternative of establishing separate denominational colleges. This by no means easy choice in a community rigidly divided along sectarian lines had been dictated by the harsh economic realities that plunged the Island economy into chronic recession.

MacLeod's account of MUC, whose modest programme was limited to the first two years of university work, began as an oral history, an analytical survey of its graduates' responses to questions concerning their upbringing, further education and subsequent careers — what he calls a "student-centred social history" (p. xiii). It then goes on to address such conventional facets of college life as curriculum, governance

2 John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A History, to 1963* (Toronto, 1984).

and town versus gown confrontations. An important goal of the study was to trace the links between the MUC alumni and those “foreign” institutions on the Canadian mainland which they were obliged to attend if they wished to augment their studies. One has to remember that throughout the period MacLeod examined, Newfoundland was either a self-governing colony hived off from Canada or, following its descent into the abyss of the Depression thirties, governed by a commission — dubbed inflatedly a “dictatorship” by MacLeod — appointed by and responsible to London.

In the course of his questioning MacLeod digs out much welcome information. The reader is confronted, for example, by the gulf separating the more disadvantaged students of the outports and their better-off classmates from St. John’s, a state of affairs that reflected the long-standing divide between “Townies” and “Baymen”. The record also reveals, however, that often the latter scored higher marks than the more casually disposed metropolitan students, mainly because so much more rode on their literally making the grade. At the same time few of the Baymen could recall that they were openly discriminated against or made to feel unwelcome by their citified cousins. And only a minority of students felt that religious differences jeopardized the cohesiveness of the undergraduate body, though at this point MacLeod has the good sense to point out that in recalling the past interviewees may be tempted to put a gloss on their recollections. All the same, the results of his investigation in this and other areas provide a map for charting not only the course of higher education in Newfoundland, but also the social, religious and economic factors that governed it during a crucial quarter century — a period that was convulsed first by depression on a grand scale and then by a world war that put the island squarely in the front line of the most protracted maritime conflict ever fought.

But I must say that all this was gleaned only after the most dogged reading of the book. At one point I asked myself the question Groucho Marx did while watching a cricket match: when does it start? By rejecting the chronological approach in favour of a more or less topical one, MacLeod succeeds only in getting things back-to-front. The socio-economic background, which ought to set the stage for the main scenario, is only hinted at in the early pages and is not fully treated until the reader is almost halfway through the book. Again, what he writes about the Newfoundland context (beginning on page 26) would have served as a much better introduction than the one he actually offers. This awkward structuring, instead of clarifying, only tends to confuse and irritate and, moreover, generates much recycling of the same information. A keener sense of the importance of chronology and a harsher editorial hand were clearly called for.

A better-organized and more lucidly written treatment of a related theme is Paul Axelrod’s *Making a Middle Class*, the first comprehensive study of English-Canadian student life and behaviour. In many ways this is a highly informative contribution both to the history of youth and the study of higher education in Canada. It also affords fresh insights into the Depression that other studies have tended to overlook. As well, it seeks to dispel certain misconceptions or myths about who went to college in the “dirty thirties”. It was often assumed that only the well-born and well-heeled could afford a college education in those fractured times. Axelrod sets out to show that this was far from the case, and that most of those who attended

university sprang from middle-class families “whose major income-earners were non-manual workers who enjoyed social status but exercised limited economic power, and whose standard of living ranged from the very modest to the very comfortable” (p. 170). This unfolds in a methodological appendix which, to my mind, could have been put to better use as part of the introduction to his study. In any case, after discussing the respective merits of stratification theorists and of Marxist and neo-Marxist writers on class, as well as ritualistically noting the contributions of E.P. Thompson to the debate, Axelrod concludes that the three-tiered arrangement of upper, middle and working classes best serves his purpose.

All this is fine as far as it goes, but the approach begs certain questions. In the part of Hamilton, Ontario, where I grew up, most people were aware that the local students who went off to McMaster were not exactly affluent or high up on the social scale and consequently would not have been considered part of the myth that Axelrod makes so much of. Indeed his myth sounds very much like a straw man. After all, by moving from Toronto to Hamilton in 1930, McMaster provided the “Ambitious City” students of modest means with the only opportunity to attend university throughout the decade that followed.

There is another problem, this time with the author’s definition of middle class as embracing varying species of non-manual workers with social status. This makes little allowance for those representatives of the Canadian petite bourgeoisie who, while they toiled with their hands, nonetheless established small, flourishing businesses, sometimes with the help of a modest or one-person work force. As a consequence they often had an above-average income for their neighbourhood and an equally considerable standing in it. A neighbour of ours, who had little difficulty sending his two children through the local university, may well have been typical of this particular group and could have been classified in this way. But according to Axelrod’s model he would have found himself ticked in the working-class column, while my father, a clerk who probably earned considerably less than this self-employed “worker”, would have been lodged in the middle-class column. Obviously, like economics and the weather, attempts at class delineation are open to a great many variables. At least Axelrod tried, and that surely counts for a good deal.

I have another query or two before I turn to more positive statements. Why call the book *Making a Middle Class* when what it really promotes is the notion of *entrenching* those middle-class values that already existed in Canadian society, and which a whole generation of students brought with them to the lecture hall and laboratory? And why the concentration on the 1930s, unless of course the original intent was to come up with a fresh perspective on the Depression in Canada? If not, I would have thought that the whole interwar period merited a full investigation, if only to show how much student life in the more stable and prosperous 1920s may have differed from that in the grimmer decade that followed.

But for the period examined, Axelrod’s book offers a shrewd and perceptive analysis of campus life in Canada and produces a gold mine of information on who and what was taught at our universities. Extracurricular as well as curricular concerns — running the gamut from athletics through clubs and societies embodying a myriad of interests, to attempts to establish fraternities — are given enthusiastic and scholarly coverage. The reader is left in little doubt about the imaginative and

hopeful way in which a whole generation of undergraduates, male and female alike, exploited its campus opportunities and conjured up its future. In its own unique fashion that generation reflected in one way or another the aspirations and outlook of those who, like Frank R. Scott and Cyril James, served as its mentors in that best and worst of times.

CHARLES M. JOHNSTON