

*Sir Robert Falconer: A Biography*, James G. Greenlee, Toronto,  
University of Toronto Press, 1988. Pp 407.

Philip C. Enros

Volume 13, Number 2 (37), Fall–Winter 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800291ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800291ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Enros, P. C. (1989). Review of [*Sir Robert Falconer: A Biography*, James G. Greenlee, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988. Pp 407.] *Scientia Canadensis*, 13(2), 124–126. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800291ar>

*Sir Robert Falconer: A Biography*, James G. Greenlee, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1988. Pp 407.

Robert Alexander Falconer (1867-1943) was president of the University of Toronto for the twenty five years from 1907 to 1932. He was born in Nova Scotia, but moved with his family to Trinidad in 1877 because his father, a Presbyterian minister, wished to do missionary work. An excellent student, Falconer won a scholarship that gave him the opportunity to take an undergraduate degree at the University of Edinburgh. There he studied classics and then divinity. In 1892, immediately following his studies, Falconer obtained a faculty position at the Presbyterian College in Halifax. He was principal of

the College for only three years when he became the unexpected choice for President of the newly reformed University of Toronto.

Greenlee's work is essentially an intellectual biography. Although structured chronologically, the book's emphasis is on Falconer's views on a range of topics, for example, the British Empire, the United States, World War I, graduate studies, extension work and church union. While this approach gives the reader a good sense of Falconer's thoughts on various matters, we do not often know how these opinions were translated into action.

We seldom see him at work, and this is a pity because Falconer was a man of action. Greenlee himself, in a detailed discussion of Falconer's stance on academic freedom, shows how words can differ from action. Falconer cautioned Frank Underhill about the dangers of engaging in political journalism even though he himself often spoke out on topics not related to his expertise or position.

Readers seeking information on the history of Canadian science and technology will find little of interest in this biography. As a scholar, Falconer was a biblical critic interested in the roots of Christianity. A strength of Greenlee's work is its attention to Falconer's scholarship and its context. The balance between faith and reason, which Falconer came to terms with in his work and his life, is not an unfamiliar theme to historians of science. I was interested, therefore, to learn that the controversies over evolution in the United States 'obsessed' Falconer. Unfortunately, Greenlee tells us little about Falconer's position on evolution.

While there is not much that deals directly with science and technology, I had expected the biography at least to provide me with a better feel for the University of Toronto during Falconer's long period as president. After all, Falconer is described as the 'personification of Canadian higher education in his own day' (xi). However, Greenlee's emphasis on intellectual history is not conducive to painting a picture of a growing, changing, increasingly complex institution. In addition, Greenlee is preoccupied in the biography with relations between the provincial government and the university. He does an excellent job on Falconer's views on academic freedom and his anxiety over maintaining the institution's autonomy. But other aspects of the university's development are neglected. For example, although Toronto fully blossomed into a modern university becoming a major force in Canadian R & D during Falconer's tenure, only one paragraph in the book is devoted to research at the university.

Greenlee has written a useful biography of Falconer, but one that is fundamentally flawed. I doubt that the life story of a university president - especially one who spent three-quarters of his life in higher education - can be told properly without examining

his presidential duties. What influence did Falconer have on the University of Toronto? Another biography will be needed to answer that question.

Philip C. Enros

---

**Philip C. Enros** is a science adviser with the Science Council of Canada.

---