

Reviews—Recensions

Robin S. Harris, *A History of Higher Education in Canada 1663-1960*. Toronto & Buffalo: The University of Toronto Press, 1976. Pp. xxiv+715.

No event in educational publication has comparable significance for Canada's universities and colleges with Robin Harris' eagerly awaited *A History of Higher Education in Canada, 1663-1960*. The volume was planned as the focal core of an extensive series of studies on Canadian post-secondary education, and it provides the necessary perspective both for the volumes which have preceded it in the Carnegie-supported series and for those still to appear. In scope attempted, in accuracy and objectivity of coverage, and in reliability and definitude of expression, it is the most valuable work yet to appear on the complex, convoluted story of our universities, a story marked by relatively high intellectual and ingenious achievement on the one hand and by discouraging compromise, public misunderstanding, and penury on the other.

Harris' history must be approached in the first instance as an extensive and carefully arranged reference document because this is what it primarily is, and then as a selective and compressed history of Canadian universities. The overall schematic pattern is a good one: five parallel examinations of the institutions as such, of their curricula, of their steadily expanding and accumulating faculties and schools, their slow but sure development of scholarship and research at five arbitrarily chosen dates: 1860, 1890, 1920, 1940, 1960. The schema is more than acceptable in that each date selected marks some event or circumstance which provides significant insight into the Canadian university story, and each serves as a convenient filing tab for the searcher's convenient entry into whatever part of the many-faceted account happens to concern him at the moment.

The reference materials of the book are not, of course, exhaustive. Several areas of university activity have been deliberately excluded: governance, daily life, extra-curricular activities (athletics, fraternities, student publications), the details of administration and financing along with the relations these call for with proprietary provincial governments. But essential data touching on "the preservation, dissemination, and advancement of knowledge" is largely there, and the reader can take its presentation as substantially correct and delivered without ulterior motive.

The body of the work is supplemented by pertinent tables from Statistics Canada and elsewhere, by extensive bibliographies, and by an index. The Tables (Appendices 1 and 2) are worth examining: they contain evidence on degrees conferred and enrolment numbers before World War I, information absolutely essential for the making of general and credible statements about either the state or the influence of Canadian universities up to that time.

These figures show the small beginnings, the slow development, make shockingly plain the extent to which material well-being of Canadian universities as we know them today is a direct result of Canadian participation in two world wars. The bibliographies, too, are remarkably full as might be expected from the premier university bibliographer in Canada today. The Index is adequate, if run-of-the mill; it catches a lot of items even obscure ones; it misses occasionally on obvious entries, the name of the Hon. Vincent Massey, for example; and it blunders sometimes, humourously and forgiveably: Oblates of Mother Immaculate. When the entire series of Studies on Higher Education has been completed, a joint index of names and subjects dealt with in all of them could prove a useful addendum.

Remarkable in the over-all reference picture is Harris' success in reporting so much and such varied material without ever getting lost in it and rarely becoming repetitious as he picks up time and again from where he left off 20 years and a 100 pages earlier. What is more, people who think they know universities well will come away from this book realizing that they have never before understood just how expansive the *universitas studiorum* has become in its 20th century dress. Most university people know one faculty of their university well and have a nodding acquaintance with two or three others. It will be good for them to acquaint themselves here with the historical problems of programmes in such diverse areas as theology, optometry, social work, architecture, and countless other, and to learn at first hand the intriguing story of the origin of the newer faculties, their development and university admission, and their complex variations from one university to another and the ramifications of their influence out into other kinds of institutions like community and technical colleges, professional training bodies, industry and government. Harris can never have realized fully what was to be the magnitude of his task when he generously accepted some years ago the invitation to set forth between the innocent-looking covers of a book or two the comprehensive history of Canada's provincially supported universities. Whatever the limitations that do and must inevitably creep into a book of this kind they are quickly forgotten in the awareness that the essential job has been well done.

A highly interesting recurring theme of the book is the impact on the universities of the newer disciplines and the effect of their appearance upon the traditional ones. Harris' handling of the theme is statistical and descriptive, noting for example when psychology was first offered as a discipline distinct from philosophy, or political science as a teaching subject distinct from philosophy and history, or economics and sociology as two different manifestations of history. This is a distinctly calendar approach endemic to the methodologies favoured by many professors of education and educationists generally. One would like to find it accompanied by excursions into, to mention but one area of exploration, the fragmenting of history, after the model of a Fustel de Coulanges, a Camille Jullian, even a Marc Bloch. The effect of this would be to lead Harris to qualify his conclusions about a Canadian university identity.

One of the major conclusions Harris draws from his own intensive study of the universities is that the Canadian university is not "a pale carbon copy of the American or British university," and nothing could be more true, as the history he has written constantly illustrates. On the other hand, in trying to spell out in what their unique identity consists – since there seems to be no uniquely Canadian idea thus far contributed to the university concept – he makes far too much, it seems to me, of the appearance, at least in English-speaking Canada, of honour courses in Arts and Science, and of Grade XIII as the admission

requirement. Both of these schemes or contrivances, far from illustrating a Canadian identity, are specifically Canadian confusions. The honour course (or is it the honours course; Canadians are never quite sure) is a confusion between honours obtained in competition on the one hand and specialization or concentration on the other; the grade XIII concept is basically the confused notion that the transferring of a college year to the high school somehow or other saves money, whatever its effect on the integrity of the university programme or the physiological needs of students. Harris' loyalty to the great A.S.P. Woodhouse – who evaluated such things according as they helped English become the core of the new humanities and relocated power – has led him to speak less frankly than the case calls for and to attribute to such devices more virtue than they really have. Canadian universities have in the past – even before there were honour courses and the grade XIII admission – turned out a surprising number of really good students, probably because a few extraordinarily good teachers let learning itself have its effect on them.

The notion of Canadian identity has happily led Harris to acknowledge the great contribution to Canadian universities of a number of national associations and societies and of certain American foundations. Singled out for special praise are the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the National Research Council, the Humanities and Social Science Research Councils, the Canada Council and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. They belong in the Canadian identity. The tables (pp. 344-8) which record the benefactions of the Carnegie Corporation, amazing documents that they are, but reveal the tip of the iceberg. The great thing about the Carnegie grants is that they came early and were timely. I know at first hand, for example, that the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies would never have pulled together its founding staff without Carnegie aid at precisely the right moment. The Institute's case is not unique.

When Harris was warmed up to the important role of our national associations and councils, he nearly allowed himself to launch into a plea for the amendment of the British North America Act so as to transfer responsibility for higher education from the provincial to the federal government. Thus we find him writing at the close of his engrossing chapter 25 which deals with the NCCUC conferences of 1956 and 1961 as follows: "The whole disappointing tenor of the 1961 special conference proved to be a precursor of the gradual unwelcome withdrawal of the federal government from direct involvement with the universities, and of the inevitable but equally unwelcome encroachment of the provincial governments into this territory." To speak of the involvement of the provinces in universities as an "encroachment" is strong language. Later on, in his brief section entitled "A National Policy" which concludes his important chapter 30 on "Scholarship and Research, 1960," Harris approaches anticlimax in the pale concluding sentence: "But national cooperation has always been an elusive goal for Canadians in their unceasing quest for unity within diversity." Although most are, I suppose, of the opinion that the BNA needs amending, I am personally pleased that Harris did not allow himself to direct his impressive piece of scholarship to this political conclusion. I believe that the responsibility for even higher education is best located with the provinces for the ultimate good and autonomy of learning, which seems to prosper least in the context of equalization and uniformity, principles which a federal government must almost necessarily espouse.

All Canadians are in debt to Professor Harris for the years of selfless devotion he has given to the study of Canadian university education. With the publishing of this important

historical document, he has them again eagerly awaiting to read the story of the last 20 years.

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To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies. T.H.B. Symons. Vols. I and II. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975.

By the time this review is published, the Symons Report will have been out for more than six months. Of an original printing of 4000 copies, a little over 1000 will have been distributed free and another 2500 or so sold at \$10 a copy. In the face of this spirited performance, remarkable indeed for a not exactly racy book of close to 300,000 words, a second printing will likely be on the way. I refer to the English-language edition. The French-language edition, turned back almost as soon as it was released for an overhaul because of bad translation and poor editing, may have yet to make an appearance.

For most anglophone academics at least, therefore, and I should think especially for readers of the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, the Symons Report will, by now, be familiar ground. The story-line is clear. Professor Symons was sent out to inquire into "the state of teaching and research in studies relating to Canada." He looked at university curricula and programmes of community colleges, at substance and methods in the sciences and social sciences, at education for the professions, at Canadian studies abroad. He came back to report disaster just about everywhere. He was away three years and the costs are reckoned at \$300,000, though I suspect they will end up much more than that. Well. The Report, like some loquacious stranger ushered into our midst, has had its say and fallen silent. Early reviews are in, but the real impact of the Report's findings on the university community awaits the opening of the Fall term. What may be said now, what to predict, in the quiet of this summer of '76?

Commission persons at Peterborough tell me that they've had a good press, and I don't doubt this is so, but I know from talk with others that there has also been a good deal of cavilling, even of viewing with alarm, and the fact is the Symons Report, if one has a mind to try, is not difficult to attack or at least disparage. It is less a report, we may feel, than a lament and an exhortation based on mere impressions and often dubious evidence. Conclusions, all pointing one way, infiltrate the opening paragraphs and are at work in almost every paragraph that follows. How magisterial the tone, we may say, as of some humourless father dispensing wisdom to erring children more in sorrow than in anger. How long the list of complaints and how repetitive, how earnest the admonitions. Heads wagging like some chorus-line of Diefenbakers, the Commission is forever "noting with regret," or, more deeply smitten, "dismayed to discover." Uplifted, on occasion, with the thought that "there are grounds for restrained optimism," it slumps soon into "Sometimes unfortunately. . ." and moves to the ritual ending of "A great deal remains to be done." And what a quantity of abstraction, indefiniteness and fuzz: "in certain cases," "few," "many," "frequently," "occasionally," "often," etc. Are young faculty denied advancement in their departments because they have chosen to specialize in Canadian studies? The Commission writes: "It