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Personalities & Patterns: A Review of *The Lives of Dalhousie University*, Volume 2

Waite, P. B. *The Lives of Dalhousie University, Volume 2, 1925-80: The Old College Transformed.* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998. Pp. xvi + 487; illus. CDN$55.00, (cloth).

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The Old College Transformed is old-fashioned narrative history at its most compelling, free of unnecessary theorizing, with a fit dose of judgment when required. Features that rank this work among the strongest items in the genre of Canadian university histories are its appealing prose style, clean organization, comprehensiveness in contents (although there may be one or two weaknesses worth mentioning), and thorough, imaginative use of documentary sources.

Waite's writing style is graced by language that is treasureably fresh and muscular: striking, everyday words free of academic jargon. He refers to: departments that did not welcome "having big names parachuted in," Edward Sheffield's "blockbuster" paper on university enrolments, Edgar Friedenberg, the "spectacular" American import, and "gusts" of enthusiastic suggestions from students that blew into the architect's office when the Student Union building was being planned (249, 286, 332, 383). He describes the scholarly atmosphere when he first joined the faculty in the early 1950s: "One read one's subject. Publication was the refuge of drones.... What mattered at Dalhousie was not adding a meagre drop to the ocean of truth, but to measure its depths and distances" (182).

The toughest test of good writing is to make the language interesting even when budgets and finances are the subject. Waite graduates with honours. Years of penury exacted a toll on the library, "breaking its runs of periodicals, squeezing its purchases of books. Professors' cars parked behind the big new building were an ironic juxtaposition, usually ancient ones that limped through the world trailing the smell of burnt oil. New cars seemed to belong either to the president or to a student." The best one-liner is found in Waite's summation of one-half of social life on campus prior to the sleek expansions of the 1960s: Atwood's canteen, "noisy ... unrelenting Atwood's, with its mugs of hot, thin, watery coffee, steam looking for caffeine" (179-81, 285-6). Appreciating finely crafted language does not obscure the fact we are here wading through a raft of great stories: the dog on stage at convocation; water sloshing in washbasins as the high-rise residence tower swayed (233, 324). The most engrossing tale is the forced resignation of a president after fourteen years of escalating arrogance. Waite gives an entire chapter to "Firing Carleton Stanley 1943-45."

Each of the other eleven chapters presents an account of institutional life and development during a relatively short span of time, typically four or five years. This, one immediately notices, is roughly the length of time an average successful student might have spent on campus, qualifying for a bachelor's degree in four

years after grade 11, or three years after grade 12, perhaps staying for an additional period of graduate study or professional preparation.

Does Waite, then, make the university's clients the measure of his work? Is the ebb and flow of successive student generations accepted as the principal pulse in Dalhousie's affairs? The answer is no. While he does not ignore the students, there are a half-dozen other aspects to which Waite gives lengthier discussion. In their approximate order of importance, judged by how they bulk in the text, these key issues for understanding Dalhousie are:

- governance
- staff
- the spirit of the place
- elaboration of university structure
- the social and especially political context in which the university operated, and
- physical plant.

Waite shines brightest in presenting the varied personalities—with their strong principles and funny quirks—who served on Dalhousie's faculty. Waite cites, for example: the law professor whose examinations featured the fictional firm of Stickem, Good & Proper; the weary historian who considered his subject to be a discouraging record of crime, folly, and lust, and showed it; and in 1953, the first case of a pregnant professor. Ernest Guptill, "inveterate story-teller" and gifted teacher of physics, believed "lectures were ipso facto dull; therefore schemes had to be devised to stir students up, competitions within class, votes for the right answer." An amateur sailor, Guptill died tragically of hypothermia in 1976, clinging to the wreckage of his capsized boat (49, 145-7, 187, 277, 366).

Master story-teller himself, Waite gives us maybe two hundred compelling portraits of the men and a few women who staffed Dalhousie's disciplines through the middle 1900s. In addition, he does not fail to lead us through necessary mundane topics like pensions and salaries, and the 1978 certification of the Faculty Association (43, 222, 229, 382-4). If there is a weakness in Waite's handling of staff and staffing, however, it is the failure to discover patterns in the provenance of human faces that Dalhousie professors gave to higher education. Significant questions about the professoriate in general are not addressed. What was their mixture of nationalities and backgrounds? Were they mostly Nova Scotians with Toronto degrees, Oxbridge survivors with or without phoney accents, or some other species? Was galloping Americanization ever a peril? What was their average age and extent of academic qualification at first appointment? Was race and religion a factor? To what extent had near-exclusion of women been softened by the end of the study period? Despite eloquent testimony about many individual oaks and elms, we are left unaware of this woodlot's overall state.

Waite's greatest innovation, a superb and unexpected gift, is to make even governance interesting. The method is the same as in his treatment of staff: avoid generalities and lay the greatest stress on personalities, interactions between them, and aspects of human interest. Crises and crusades on the administrative front permeate the work. The best stories usually seem to concern tension particularly between presidents and other powerful (non-academic) figures in Dalhousie's governing structure. For example, Fred Pearson, chair of the board (from 1927 to 1932), was left "stunned and bitter" when, in the middle of a meeting, he was suddenly ousted from all links with the university that had become his home away from home since student days forty years earlier. Colonel K. C. Laurie, one of his successors, "used the King's English in ways more suited to the army than the university." When President Stanley ridiculed Laurie's correspondence for faulty grammar and bad spelling (s-p-e-a-c-h), it turned out he Stanley went too far.

Alexander Kerr, president in the 1950s, was a United Church minister who managed to impose his tee-

total Presbyterian views on the university until C. D. Howe appeared on the scene as chancellor. In 1958, Howe was planning a reception off campus to celebrate the cornerstone of a new science building. Kerr spoke up to remind everyone of the rule against alcohol. At this, Howe bridled: "See heah Doctah Kahr," he said with his flattened Massachusetts "r"s, "this is my pahty.... You don't have to come if you don't want to" (56-60, 134, 218).

Descending from the ranks of administrators and faculty, Waite is not so apt or thorough when it comes to students. Considering the floods of students who gave the university its life, the most numerous lives of Dalhousie are under-represented. During the academic year 1963-64, student-teacher ratios were 99:1 in biology, 114:1 in economics, and approaching 138:1 in English (279). Including King's College, Dalhousie's total enrolment in 1925-26 was recorded as 730, and in 1980-81 as 9,018. The point is that, alongside the sparse number of professors, each year hundreds, later thousands, of students arrived on campus eager to learn and live. Despite their numerical superiority, Waite only thinly includes students in this institutional history.

It is a dilemma to determine when students can be brought fully into such a story, and especially how. For Waite, the first fitting opportunity was the Gowanloch Affair (in 1930, a female undergraduate, Eleanor, was cited as co-respondent in a male professor's divorce). On which points did the student body agree or disagree with the treatment of the professor, his wife, or the woman student? Waite's introduction to this story mentions one morning when Professor Gowanloch did not appear for the scheduled lecture. His students, worrying about him—or just plain nosy—went to his home and found him in bed. There was no sign of Eleanor on this occasion (40). Surely questions could be asked about a student body willing to intrude so into the professor's privacy. Waite makes no comment. His discussion of reaction to the eventual scandal is limited to what the faculty and the senate thought. The views of students, including young Eleanor's friends, would have been helpful, for students, especially those in residence, would have likely understood what was going on better than faculty and senate.

Perhaps it is not Waite's fault if he found students on the whole less interesting than faculty and administrators. Although the 1960s are often characterized as a time of student radicalism, for example, the Halifax university had very few incidents. "Disruptive radicalism was consumed by its own excesses, and it never had much student support at Dalhousie." Waite recounts the occupation of President Hicks' office in 1970 by New Democratic Youth who were protesting the lack of student participation in the senate and in faculty-recruitment decisions). The occupation occurred while Hicks was in Toronto. After Hicks got back to Halifax, the occupying students told him: "We knew you weren't here and we weren't upsetting anything and we wanted to make the gesture" (316-319). That says much about student radicalism at Dalhousie.

Waite did locate and thoroughly examine, however, the slim store of student-oriented and student-generated material that was available. He sums up the student newspaper, *The Gazette*, in his "Bibliographic Essay." "For student news and events on campus *The Gazette* can sometimes be vulgar and tasteless." Worse, Waite found that it often seemed not very representative of common student views, as, in the late 1960s, the *Gazette* was a "lonely voice, a bittern crying in a wilderness of its own making" (417-419).

The sources used in preparing this volume are obviously extensive and weighted towards presidents and their correspondence and the minutes of senate, board of governors, and faculty meetings. Waite's approach to interviews he conducted makes them, if accuracy were the aim, seem a risky venture. All interviews were recorded "not by tape recorder but by notes that I made either at the time or as soon as possible afterward" (417-418). Perhaps it is the fifty-plus pages of endnotes that best illustrate the breadth of research undertaken. Often an endnote contains additional explanation, which adds immeasurably to our understanding of the events, documents, and people involved.

The tables in the appendix list student numbers by faculty, gender, and permanent residence. They are simple in presentation and in what they tell the reader about Dalhousie students. Although adding to the

research task for the book which already took eleven years to complete, tables for religious background, ethnicity, and socio-economic class would have been useful too. While the twelve-fold increase in enrolment is traced year by year from 1925 to 1980, the relative paucity of insight on students remains a problem. Some statistics need specificity and relevance.

Perhaps for Waite the deterrent to delve deeper into student affairs was the attraction of voluminous papers left by faculty, presidents, senators, governors, and staff. The quantity and quality of material produced by students is much less. How can this problem be overcome? The historian's instinct is to mouse around in archives and use everything that comes to sight. But what if a certain type of evidence is not found there? Then suppose that during a project like this one learned about a special collection of memoirs of their youth and higher education, written or dictated or recorded, by folk who were students at Dalhousie through the middle 1900s? This would be a godsend of sources, allowing the historian to integrate student experience and views with the evidence gained from presidents' correspondence and other official files.

Unfortunately, at Dalhousie, such an archival goldmine does not exist. Before it can be exploited, the student-centred archive has first to be created. Jewels of memory will pine unreachable until by strenuous effort they are coaxed out into records. The student perspective is the hardest to recover; it takes measures the print-bound historians find heroic, namely the expensive, time-consuming tactics of oral history.

Since Waite made only modest use of this approach, his Dalhousie history is a little thin on the student side. Expertly exhausting all the print sources, he presents a fascinating, insightful, honest account of faculty members and administrators, personalities foremost, warts and all. His splendid book traces the contours of student-body expansion and of the university's twentieth-century transformation, expressing everything with muscular elegance.