



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810
2006 • Vol. 6, No. 1

“The Way Must Be Tried”: A Progress Report

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(Paper given at Librarians’ Meeting, York University, 26 April 2005)

Institutional histories are not much in favour with historians these days, and this generalization certainly applies to histories of universities. Why this should be true is not altogether clear to me, but I suspect there is some truth to the adage that “familiarity breeds contempt.” More important may be that universities have a not undeserved image of elitism, and that they have for most of their history been dominated by men. This troubles some historians, especially, I suspect, the now substantial group of women among our number.

The strong and growing influence of social history since 1970 has also played a role. Many historians have been more interested in groups of anonymous people that were until recently largely when not completely ignored by historians, among them women and working people, especially blue-collar and pink-collar workers, as well as ethnic minorities of all kinds. The history of education at the lower levels does attract considerable interest but the history of higher education is very much a minority taste.

This is something I have become very conscious of since the publication of my book *Academic Freedom in Canada: A History*. It is disconcerting to realize that a project I spent fifteen years and almost \$50,000 on (fortunately almost all of it was other people’s money), a project that engaged me fully and that I continue to believe to be important, and that has been well reviewed, has been greeted with a yawn, not only by the general public — that I pretty well expected — but also within the academy, many historians among them. They really don’t seem to care.

That goes for the history of universities as well. No one has said it in so many words, at least not to me, but I suppose it scarcely needs to be said: the enterprise is simply not at the cutting edge of the discipline, the phrase commonly used to indicate what is currently fashionable. This has further implications. Outside research funding is unlikely to be available, peer evaluators tending to award scarce funds to projects that seem to be at or at least near the cutting edge, tending also to the view that if a university wants a history written, its president and governing board ought to come up with the money. That is fair enough, but it is likely to discourage younger scholars wishing to make their mark. For these, outside funding is of key importance: at many universities, the amount of outside

funds obtained seems to loom larger than the results obtained with the money, and research funding does influence scholars' prospects for promotion.

In fact, the enterprise of writing university history has *never* been really fashionable. Of the historians in Canada who have tackled the history of an institution of higher learning during the last fifty years, few have been well-published authors in other fields or even in the field of higher education. Those who come to mind include W.L. Morton, who wrote an all-too-brief history of the University of Manitoba, Charles M. Johnston, who wrote a two-volume history of McMaster University, John G. Reid, who did the same for Mount Allison, P.B. Waite, who contributed two volumes about Dalhousie, Hilda Neatby, who began a history of Queen's University that was completed by Frederick Gibson, Jean Hamelin, who completed a history of Laval, and H. Blair Neatby, who collaborated in the writing of a history of Carleton. For some of these historians, writing their university's history was a retirement project.

At several institutions, the task has fallen to historians for whom the history of their university seems to have been their major scholarly project such as John Gwynne-Timothy (Western Ontario), Michael Hayden (Saskatchewan), and James Cameron (St Francis Xavier), or to scholars who are not professional historians. The project of writing the history of the University of Toronto wore out two older professional historians, Robin Harris and Gerald M. Craig, before it was pushed to completion by a retired legal scholar and amateur historian, Martin Friedland. Toronto is not the only university to have its history written by someone outside the historical profession. Other institutions whose history has been written by persons who were not trained as historians include McGill, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Alberta, British Columbia (although the best chapter of its now very dated history, really the only sound chapter in the book, *was* written by a historian), Trent University, and the University of Victoria. The result is not usually work of high scholarly quality, and Walter Johns's history of the University of Alberta is decidedly weak.

The books are all too often difficult to get through, filled as they tend to be with the names of individuals and units. In fairness to the authors, though, let me immediately add that the task that faces the university historian is a daunting one. The mature university is a complex and complicated organism that typically has expanded greatly since the early 1960s, adding faculties, programmes, administrative departments, research centres, and student organizations in promiscuous profusion. At the same time, student numbers have risen to levels that were unimaginable half a century ago. How does one do justice to this luxurious growth without turning what is intended to be a book into a catalogue, a reference work that scarcely anyone will read from cover to cover and none will read for pleasure? Contemplating this question has, I am convinced, led more than a few historians to abandon thoughts of tackling the history of their institutions and to turn to other projects which are at the same time easier *and* more likely to earn the respect of their professional peers.

It is unsurprising, then, that a number of universities lack histories that take their institutions into the post-1963 era, the age of the baby boomers as university students (and later faculty and administrators) and that several have never had a history published about them at all. The list of institutions that currently need histories or histories better than those languishing on library shelves is long and includes (besides York) British Columbia, Simon Fraser, Alberta, Calgary, Lethbridge, Regina, Brandon, Manitoba, Lakehead, Laurentian, Windsor, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier, Guelph, Brock, Ottawa, Concordia, New Brunswick, St. Mary's, and Mt. St. Vincent, as well as various campuses of the Université du Québec.¹ Among the institutions whose histories need updating to bring them into the era of huge and rapid expansion are Winnipeg, McMaster, Queen's, McGill, Montréal, Mount Allison, and the Memorial University of Newfoundland.

¹Some of these histories, for example one of the University of Waterloo by Kenneth McLaughlin, are now being written.

Some of these institutions are currently looking for scholars to write their history. At UBC, the task has recently been assumed by three scholars working cooperatively. But this happened after a protracted search which back in 2002 led into a dead-end, as the search committee rejected several proposals. This suggests differences of opinion as to what a university history should contain, what approach it should take, and what its intended audience should be.

By this time, you may be wondering why I took the job of writing the history of York. Sometimes I wonder, too. I did not apply for the job; it came looking for me, as it were, in the guise of Kent Haworth, who until his untimely death in 2003 was the archivist of this university. As the chair of a search committee appointed to find someone who would write a history of York that would appear in time for the university's fiftieth anniversary in the spring of 2009, he asked me to think about assuming the task. He was part of a one-two punch, being followed by President Lorna Marsden, who plied me with some very good wine in the lounge of the Hotel Intercontinental, listened to my misgivings and concerns, and then made me an offer I could not refuse: three post-retirement years at full salary and benefits, starting on 1 July 2005.

When she made the offer, back in early 2000, I was working somewhat desultorily on a history of Ontario in collaboration with Roger Hall of the University of Western Ontario. Upon its completion, I expected to return at last to a topic I had been working on in the early 1980s, the history of taxation in Canada. The opportunity Lorna offered me allowed me the time I thought I needed to complete the Ontario project and also offered very real financial advantages over the taxation project. I was at the stage in my career that I would have to be satisfied with whatever professional reputation I had already gathered for myself, so that I did not fear the damage writing a university history might do to that reputation. As well, I had read enough university histories as part of my study of academic freedom and had done enough work in university archives from Halifax to Victoria to have a shrewd idea of what I was getting into.

Having accepted an appointment effective July 1st, 2002 — back in 2000, I thought I could complete the Ontario history in two years; eventually I abandoned it — I had ample time to think about the approach I should adopt. I would have unrestricted access to the University's records and the president had promised me freedom in seeking publication for what I chose to write. She said, though, that if I chose to write a sober, scholarly account, I should also give thought to assisting with the production of a lavishly-illustrated book that would have a presumably wider appeal.

What sort of history is appropriate to an institution as young as York? Some who helped to conceive and found it are still alive, as are quite a few of those who joined the university in its first decade of existence. The institution's first fifteen years are marked by several major conflicts and controversies. One, now largely forgotten, has to do with the events in the summer and fall of 1959 that led to the almost wholesale replacement of the founding board of governors by a new board. Better known is the quarrel in 1962-63 between the first president, Murray G. Ross, and one of his key associates in developing the new university, John Seeley, which prompted the resignation of Seeley and several other faculty members in protest against the president's management style and his plans for the university.

Conflict was evident again in 1969-70, when a successor to Murray Ross was being chosen. A major brouhaha broke out in the fall of 1972 when a decline in enrolment prompted a serious financial crisis. One of its results was that President David Slater, who succeeded Ross, resigned under pressure early in 1973. Another result was a movement, influenced also by other variables, towards faculty and staff unionization at the university, a development that has prompted several serious strikes and a good deal of bad blood. Let me hasten to assure you that I remain a supporter of unionization to this day. In my view, the strikes had more to do with a province-wide funding formula that discounted

growth and thereby under-funded York than they did with unionization as such.

It would be wrong to make too much of these conflicts. More than one person I have interviewed has offered the thought that, although crisis and conflict stick easily in one's memory, they are not what York has been about — that they obscure the very substantial achievement in beginning with a vision of a new university and, within a few decades, producing a multi-faculty university in several locations enrolling more than 40,000 students. Yet, the conflicts are there and a lot of people still feel very strongly about them and the events that prompted them. This makes the writing of a history, to say nothing of a dispassionate history, a perilous task.

Quite aside from the pitfalls facing any historian in dealing with controversial events, when many of the *dramatis personae* are still alive and interested, I face another difficulty. Having joined the faculty in 1968 and having soon afterwards become active in the York University Faculty Association, I am not a dispassionate observer. In 1969-70, I served as the Glendon College representative on the YUFA executive and was in that way part of a group that was very much *parti pris* in the debate — put it mildly — over who among the front-running candidates for the presidency should get the job: the Dean of Arts, Jack Saywell, or the Dean of Administrative Studies, Jim Gillies. In 1972-73, I was chair of YUFA and was fully caught up in the anguished deliberations of that fall and early winter. As a late addition to the YUFA negotiating team in May of 1973, moreover, I got a close look at the problems of bargaining collectively in a non-union context. These helped to turn me into a proponent of faculty unionization and that, in turn, makes it impossible for me to pretend that I am unbiased on this issue as on several others. I am too much part of the furniture to be able to criticize the layout of the room, as it were.

Of course, I am not alone in this plight. Some historians of universities, to be sure, are dealing with institutions that began in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and they can, if they choose, avoid writing about a recent past in which they played a part. Alternatively, they can write about it in a way that downplays the quarrels and controversies; they can “accentuate the positive,” as the song commands us, and “eliminate the negative / Latch on to the affirmative / Don't mess with Mister In-Between.”² But to historians, this is bound to seem unsatisfactory. As a profession, we don't mind speaking ill of the dead if it seems called for and of the living if we think we can get away with it. And we are apt to believe, as Ionesco put it in *The Bald Soprano*, that “the truth lies somewhere in between.”³ I see the historian as something like a police detective trying to puzzle out what happened on the basis of incomplete evidence while seeking to compensate for his or her own biases. Hiding from where the evidence leads you, is failing to do the job.

But whereas police detectives usually don't have to worry about how the people they happen to come across in their investigations will react to the findings they make available to officers of the legal system, historians dealing with recent (and sometimes not so recent) events do have to be aware of that reaction and need to realize that it may be unpleasant, even threatening. Friends may be lost; enemies may easily be made. Here, too, may be found a reason that historians tend to avoid university history: who wants to offend present or former colleagues, possibly even risk having to defend oneself against the charge of defamation?

Writing about a young institution does not allow me the copout of avoiding the recent past. And I have no wish to produce a text that simply avoids the difficult moments while I celebrate the accomplishments. How, then, should I proceed?

² Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen, “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive,” 1944.

³ The line concludes an exchange that is central to Eugene Ionesco's 1950 absurdist play *La cantratrice chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*): “The heart has its reasons.” “They also say the opposite.” “The truth lies somewhere in between.” Banal as the conclusion may seem, it also contains a basic truth.

This question occupied me a good deal in the two years between my agreeing to become the university's historian and assuming my duties in the summer of 2002. And by that time, I had come up with an answer that, since then, has continued to seem to me the most sensible one. In my choice, I have been influenced by the history written of the institution where I spent my undergraduate years and by the man who wrote it, Peter Smith. The institution is the University of Victoria, the successor to Victoria College, which was affiliated with the University of British Columbia until 1963, and, before it, of Victoria College McGill, which lasted from 1903 to 1915. UVic's history is very largely recent history, like York's, and Peter was very much a part of it, having spent his first two undergraduate years there and having joined its faculty in 1960.

Peter was a classicist rather than a historian, but like many classicists, he had a good sense of history. He knew he had to deal with controversies, but he did not want them to dominate the book. He was eager to celebrate accomplishments by students, faculty members, and administrators but he did not want to become a mere booster. So he decided to focus on telling the stories of people who at one point or another were part of the tri-partite institution he was writing about. He gave the book the title *A Multitude of the Wise*, this being the translation of the university's Latin motto, and the subtitle *UVic Remembered*.

It will be clear to you that I not only borrowed an approach from Peter but also his idea for a title, in my case *The Way Must Be Tried*. President Murray Ross used this title for his memoirs. Since that book is now out of print, I feel free to use it, using *York University Remembered* as my subtitle.

As I currently envisage it, the book's skeleton will be based on the record as it is revealed primarily by archival research. My luck with research assistance has not been great so far but it is my understanding that the scanning of official documents will soon begin, creating a database that will be accessible to me when I begin to write the book in the fall of 2006. The flesh of the book will be based on interviews and, even more important, on reminiscences that students, faculty members, administrators, and board members, all those who are part of York's history, have of the institution and that they are willing to share with the potential readers of the book. I really should say "institutions," because there are important variations in the experiences that people have had at York, differences among those who have worked in different faculties — differences, too, between those who have been at the Glendon Campus, those who have been at Keele, and, most interestingly perhaps, those who have been at both.

The interviews I have been doing, some eighty so far, have all been on the understanding that whatever is said I will hold in confidence and won't attribute to the interviewee unless I subsequently ask for permission to use it and the interviewee approves. I am encouraging all of those interviewed to put at least some of what they remember in writing with a view to my using it. And I have asked the alumni associations and employee associations of York, in their publications, to solicit recollections from those who have studied and worked here. People have for some months been able to enter their recollections on a website created for that purpose.

I will also be looking for photographs and other illustrations in order to provide a visual as well as written record. Ideally, the book will contain 200 pages of text and a 100 of illustrations, some of them a photo essay on the way the campuses look today. This will be especially useful and interesting to those who have studied at the Keele campus, for it seems to be changing every year. In these ways, I believe, my title and subtitle will gain substance, and the book will indeed represent York University's past; it will offer a story which has some claim to completeness, which shows that the way has indeed been tried.