

Queen's University. Volume I: 1841-1917

Queen's, Queen's, Queen's

Neatby, Hilda. *Queen's University. Volume I: 1841-1917*. Edited by Frederick W. Gibson and Roger Graham. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978. Pp. xvi, 346. \$25.00.

Hamilton, Herb. *Queen's, Queen's, Queen's*. Kingston: Alumni Association of Queen's University, 1977. Pp. xi, 310. \$6.95. paper.

These two very different histories of Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, raise important questions about the historiography of higher education. Behind this are the even more basic questions of what constitutes a university, and what it is that makes Queen's distinctive on the Canadian university scene.

The Neatby work, the first of a projected two-volume series, was commissioned by the administration and trustees of the university. The result is a scholarly, institutional history that matches W.L. Morton's *Manitoba: One University* as a model for university studies. Hamilton's *Queen's, Queen's, Queen's* is entirely different. Commissioned by the alumni association, it is a social history of twentieth century student life, and in itself a valuable contribution to the popular history of post-secondary learning.

Neatby approached her task from a lifetime of academic history and educational criticism. As a distinguished professor at the University of Saskatchewan, she had earned a solid reputation within the Canadian historical profession for her political and administrative studies of late eighteenth century Quebec. Her service on the Massey Commission and her 1953 best-seller, *So Little for the Mind*, had also earned her a reputation as a sharp critic of student achievement in the country's elementary and secondary schools. Both of these backgrounds influence Prof. Neatby's approach to the history of Queen's University.

Queen's University. Volume I carries the story from the origins of the university, through the long nineteenth century financial, political and ecclesiastical controversies, the outstanding principalship of George Munro Grant at the end of the century, to the retirement of Principal Daniel Gordon in 1917.

By that date Queen's was on the threshold of establishing and holding an important place in the country. From its origins as a Presbyterian "Bible School", it had progressively transformed itself into a regional college serving eastern Ontario, and finally into a national university. By the end of the First World War, Queen's drew its applicants and sent its graduates from, to use Grant's words, "ocean to ocean". The links between Queen's and the federal civil service in Ottawa had also been forged.

Neatby explains this transformation in terms of the university's strong roots in the Scottish tradition of higher education, its support from its constituents, its usually strong leadership in the principal's office, its qualified professional staff, and its timely moves from its original arts and theology base into the sciences and the professional faculties. Despite the solid conceptual framework, thorough research and lively writings, this is traditional university history, though traditional history at its best.

To be fair, Prof. Neatby does address what she calls "the most difficult question to answer". She defines this as "what the students were like, how they lived and worked and amused themselves, what they thought and what they said to each other". She does deal with the poor academic backgrounds of entrants coming from the high schools, rules regarding student dress and discipline, the origins of the Alma Mater Society and the student newspaper, and even mentions one of the more unique extra-curricular experiences of Queen's students — life in the boarding houses of Kingston.

But the students tend to remain on the periphery. Prof. Neatby's view is essentially the view from the principal's chair. The result is that *Queen's University. Volume I* helps explain only half of that institution's mystique — its intellectual strength. That more elusive factor of undergraduate and alumni "spirit" is de-emphasized.

In *Queen's, Queen's, Queen's*, Herb Hamilton addresses this equally important characteristic of the university. He puts the student at the centre of his fast-paced, popular account. To Hamilton, Queen's is the school song and the school yell, legendary characters like Alfie Pierce and William "Dollar Bill" Allen, cheerleaders and student pranks, and especially "warm, sunny, autumn afternoons in the old George Richardson stadium as the Golden Gaels engaged in mortal combat with the warriors of a rival institution".

Taken together, these two accounts would come close to what is needed in the writing of university history in Canada. But they aren't likely to be taken together. Academic historians will read Neatby, applaud her scholarship, and confirm the wisdom of writing institutional history. Queen's graduates will read Hamilton, feel good about their nostalgic memories of undergraduate days, and encourage their sons and daughters to apply for admission.

What is needed is an approach that goes beyond the sum total of Neatby and Hamilton. Such an approach presents itself to Prof. Frederick Gibson who, following the unfortunate death of Hilda Neatby, has been commissioned to write the "official" *Queen's University. Volume II*.

Gibson must take into consideration both the institutional approach of Neatby and the social approach of Hamilton. But intellectual strength and student spirit are not sufficient. The success of Queen's, and the challenge for Gibson, are to be found at the intersection of these two phenomena. Put in an historical context, we need answers to such questions as: What kind of student is attracted to Queen's? Who are accepted? What is the mix of socio-economic, geographic, ethnic and sex backgrounds? What happens to students during their undergraduate studies? Who succeeds and who fails? What happens to Queen's graduates? Where do they live and what do they do? To what extent is their future life shaped by their undergraduate experience?

As Hilda Neatby suggests, these are "most difficult question(s) to answer." But the existence of twentieth century student and alumni records, plus the availability of the tools of quantitative history, should bring these questions to the fore, and render them easier to answer, for the more recent period in the history of the institution.

"Oil Thigh na Banrighin gu Brath!" is one of the lines of Queen's University's Gaelic cheer. This translates roughly as "Queen's forever". Neatby and Hamilton both help explain the strong sense of continuity that gives Queen's its strength and spirit. The challenge now directly before Prof. Gibson, and indirectly before any future historian of higher education in Canada, is to explain the mystique of a university at an even deeper level. Then we may be closer to knowing why it is "Queen's forever".

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