

Robert Craig Brown
Arts & Science at Toronto: A History, 1827–1990

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A lone photo of Professor Ramsay Wright, Vice President and Dean of Arts (1901–12), graces the dust-jacket cover of this history of the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts & Science (FAS), commissioned by the Faculty and written by one of their former vice-deans (1987–92), Robert Craig Brown (now Professor Emeritus, Department of History).¹ Just over a century ago, in 1911, Toronto newspapers were agog when the man pictured on the cover of Brown's book, Professor Ramsay Wright, who had been passed over a few years earlier for the University of Toronto's presidency, delivered a controversial speech in a large, public meeting in the Physics auditorium, which Wright's on- and off-campus recognition had filled. As his renowned oratorical skill rose into the steamy July evening, Wright delivered fear-filled advocacy against federal policies to accept "polyglot [i.e., non-Anglo] populations of immigrants," criminal offenders, the "insane and feeble-minded," and other "bad strains of stock."² He urged that their right to propagate, as well as to immigrate, should be curtailed through the burgeoning field of human eugenics. Wright on numerous occasions embraced the rhetoric of racial purity that would drive devastatingly extreme measures in the ensuing decades. Yet despite vivid media coverage at the time, and more recent commentary on Wright's stigmatic exhortations, Brown's references to Wright, are uniformly laudatory, while discreetly avoiding any mention of his eugenic or other prospective lapses.

What irks about this approach, especially for a university proud to style itself as Canada's largest and best, is that it is unnecessary for Brown, or anyone, to excavate checkered celebrities of the past as heroic figures, when there are plenty of the genuine article. From the greats who taught FAS students, where may we learn about Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, or 1986 Nobel laureate John Polanyi, for example, about whom nary a word can be found in this book?

Three over-arching themes are interspersed through Brown's chronological narrative: the impact on University of Toronto and FAS of the larger societal context, especially political; the evolving intricacies of the FAS's academic subject structures; and a sprinkling throughout of illuminating vignettes on personalities and events of authentic merit.

The first of these themes is this book's strong suit, and an admirable distinction from many previous histories of the University of Toronto. Created and nurtured by the Clergy Reserves—shared until 1867 only with its then-affiliated, elite, private boys' school, Upper Canada College—in the traditional worldview of the Family Compact, this university and the FAS as its largest component thereafter faced, almost continuously, inexorable growth and expansion pressures: federations; population booms; wars' aftermaths; democratization in social expectations of post-secondary access; economic forces; growth visions; and personal ambitions. Brown ably navigates the internal and external currents or storms that successively ensued. University of Toronto was anchored from the outset, geographically at Queen's Park and conceptually as Ontario's "Provincial" university, and yet strove to evolve graciously as the academic *primus inter pares*.

The author has resolutely explored his second theme, viz. the evolving nature of the Faculty's academic curricula, subjects, and administrative structures, though at times risking the fault of a surfeit of minutiae. Page 45 begins with four sentences in a row, three of which have 39 words while a fourth has 33—each of them comprising run-on lists of course disciplines. Further down this page, sentences of similar length detail the statistics for students' exam results, in 1906. A head-count of faculty members holding each rank during 1919? See page 71 and part of Appendix D. Course enrolment stats by department for the 1920s are on p.81; et cetera.

Part of the difficulty comes from these annual-report-style synopses disrupting the narrative flow when the more essential of them might have been located as additional tables in the appendices. Aside from statistics, there seems an over-reliance on dissecting arcane curricular arrangements, such as the exhaustive documenting of the different percentages necessary for students to attain various 1909 course standings (fail, pass, second-class standing, etc) on page 41.

Although Brown is relatively frank about the university's erstwhile anti-women record, he has generally shied away from examining other sensitive matters, as in the aforementioned case of Ramsay Wright's eugenics' and anti-minorities' public campaign. Anti-Semitism is barely touched on, despite its thorough documentation by Friedland, Shorter, Levi, and others as long having been systemic at University of Toronto. Despite a lead-in or segue opportunity arising through mentioning a former FAS dean who, as a student, was awarded a Reuben Wells Leonard entrance scholarship to the university (224), Brown shelters us from the revelation made by Martin Friedland in *The University of Toronto: A History* (2002, 2013) that, from 1923, those scholarships were only available to students who were white, Protestant, as well as British subjects, until finally the Ontario Court of Appeal laid this appalling discrimination to rest in 1990.

For Brown's third theme, interspersing well-researched accounts of faculty people

and events, he has commendably drawn on diverse sources including prior publications, archived interviews, recollections, media items and commentaries, for both student and faculty experiences. In so doing he has been careful to avoid historiography's risk of "appropriation," and has not strayed into the colourful, often epic, centuries-old lore of the nine University of Toronto colleges—seven on the St. George campus and two satellites. Every FAS student has been affiliated with a college, as have a high proportion of cross-appointed faculty. Typically they were founded and led by successions of historic luminaries of often mythical proportions—the nineteenth century's John Strachan and Egerton Ryerson and the twentieth's Northrop Frye, Cardinal McGuigan, George Ignatieff, et al, interpreting Divine guidance and championing the great scholarly canons. Today FAS admits that its affiliated colleges continue to be, in effect, the heart and soul of their students' undergraduate experience. There lies more vivid history in the making!

Notes

- 1 Google Books. Robert Craig Brown, *Arts and Science at Toronto: A History, 1827–1990*, <http://tinyurl.com/nybke9e>
- 2 *The Globe* (Toronto), 19 July 1911, 8. Also: *The Mail and Empire*, 19 July 1911; *The Presbyterian* (New Series, 19:5, 3 Aug. 1911, 108); and Dennis Duffy, "Furnishing the Pictures: Arthur S. Goss, Michael Ondaatje and the Imag(in)ing of Toronto," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2001): 106-129.