

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Michiel Horn.

York University: The Way Must Be Tried.

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2009. 315 pp.

John T. Saywell.

*Someone to Teach Them: York and the Great
University Explosion, 1960–1973.*

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 296 pp.

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Is the university Western society's peculiar institution? The concept of a peculiar institution came to prominence in the title of University for California historian Kenneth Stampp's 1963 study of slavery in the antebellum American south. Where freedom was prized, slavery seemed as anomalous as to be the peculiar institution in American life.

Universities are neither private sector nor public sector, falling instead in an indeterminate middle. Whatever way you think about them and explain them, diachronically or synchronically, universities are darn right odd to outsiders, as foreign as their campuses are a maze to those unfamiliar with their ways. Universities varied greatly in places such as Bologna, Oxford, or Paris during Europe's middle ages, though few escaped the influence of Roman Catholicism or did not find themselves in town-and-gown conflicts of various sorts. In some periods such as the eighteenth century, universities tended to languish and became homes to nepotism and obscurantism, elements that never disappear. The light kindled by the hopes of science and technology lit a fuse under nineteenth-century universities and led to a diminution in religious influence that lingered nevertheless. As universities began expanding in multi-faceted ways during the twentieth century, added complexity made them seem ever more impenetrable and peculiar. The emphasis on research that had begun in North America

at the re-organized University of Chicago and at Johns Hopkins produced situations wherein members of one discipline might not be able to evaluate the output of co-workers because they could not understand it. As universities expanded in numbers and grew in size, even a mid-sized institution might today have fifty academic units and another twenty-five others providing administrative support.

Surveys and syntheses of higher education are rare because its products are so varied in terms of pedagogy and research. Historiography has resorted more readily to memoirs and university biographies, such as the two books about York University during its first fifty years, considered here. Memoirs and autobiographies generally emerge from people with administrative experience and give a top-down expression that historical writing has attempted to eschew during the past two decades. Most notable recently were the reflections of Howard Clark, former president of Dalhousie University, who argued provocatively on the basis of his experience at five universities that a surfeit of democracy led the peculiar institution astray during the latter half of the twentieth century. Apart from such reflections, institutional biographies appear regularly because universities today are major players in a public relations game where status and recognition are almost everything, apart from the actual moneys that follow renown. Still, university biographies can make vital historiographical contributions if they avoid excessive localism and situate their subjects within larger intellectual currents.

Canadian historian of higher education Brian McKillop has recently suggested that the concepts of tribalism and territorialism provide useful organizing nodes for the history of higher education. The tribes—disciplines, programs of studies, departments, or human agglomerations such as students, faculty members, staff, administrators, and boards—assert their distinctiveness and worth within the university. They all vie for territories where they can carry on their careers while supporting general goals of educating people and advancing research. In the world outside their immediate local environment, the tribes compete for territory in terms of the reputation, status, and recognition that bring funding and honours. Intermediary are a host of collective bodies, but each university itself is a special tribe trying to establish the same benefits for itself as a whole through the quality of people it attracts and through the acknowledgements that allow it to carry on with its perceived mission. While government became the key outside factor in the history of Canadian universities during the twentieth century, the importance of the private sector is sufficiently important to augment the polyglottal nature of the peculiar institution.

Michiel Horn, an historian at York's Glendon College from 1968 and now professor emeritus, has created a captivating narrative that will become the first stop for anyone wanting to know more about York University since 1959. Horn writes expansively and in masterly fashion about a great number of areas in university life, but most frequently his purview extends over students, faculty members, boards of governors, and administration. Novel or innovative programs are noted, physical expansion is discussed, and eminent researchers are brought to the reader's attention. As chair of York's faculty association in 1972–73, Horn was involved in some of the events he describes. His analyses benefit as a result, particularly as he has augmented

written records with interviewing where appropriate. The exposition is lively and the narrative rounded and non-judgmental. This admirable though necessarily celebratory text has been bound by the university into what appears as a coffee table book, too heavy to read in bed but handsomely produced and printed. Numerous historical illustrations are augmented with stunning colour photographs by Vincenzo Pietropaolo, but a name-only index detracts from the volume's usefulness for research in higher education.

John T. Saywell is a noted historian who served as York's first dean of arts at a remarkably young age, during the years from 1963 to 1973. His book, *Someone to Teach Them*, is curious in at least two regards. First of all, the volume is not really about someone to teach the hordes of students who materialized from the 1950s to the 1970s during the explosion in Canada's post-secondary sector, even though it does deal sporadically with the hiring of faculty members, and in a more concerted manner with the blistering controversy over citizenship that erupted around 1970. Secondly, the book is a curious amalgam of memoir and historical study recounted and analyzed largely from an administrative perspective. Although Saywell is now advanced in years, the younger prolific scholar re-emerges whenever he gets his hands on archives, and the details expand exponentially. (Little in Canadian historical writing revealed the discipline of history's inherited positivistic strain a half-century ago better than John Saywell's long 1960 introduction to the diary of Lady Aberdeen, wife of a Canadian governor general, in the Champlain Society publication series.)

Despite its unevenness, Saywell's memoir cum study bears reading for insights into the particular moment in the history of higher education to which it bears witness. The large cast of important and contentious academics is worth the price of admission, although the book still misses the colourful sociologist W.E. (Ted) Mann and his minor Canadian academic sexology classic, *Orgone, Reich and Eros: Wilhelm Reich's Theory of Life Energy* (published by Simon and Schuster in New York in 1973). For a study, Saywell's volume starts a little late since university enrolments began ascending significantly first following the end of World War II in 1945, and then continuously from the mid-1950s. The expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s did represent changes in demographic patterns due to the baby boomers, but as well a significant shift to higher age cohort participation rates that was based on experience in the United States, Cold War fears, scientific advances, and a North American economy strengthened rather than destroyed by global military conflict. Higher education came to be viewed as a necessity for middle class offspring aspiring to get ahead, and for the children of workers not wanting to duplicate the patterns of their parents. At the same time, the provincial ministry of education in Ontario upgraded educational requirements for teachers and many found themselves in universities in search of a degree. Universities came to be bigger, larger in number, and valued as never before as progressive elements in society and integral to its values. Behind these changes stood government funding that was as high proportionally as a part of university budgets as had ever been.

Someone to Teach Them is cast by its author in the manner of a tragedy made more profound because it begins so optimistically in the altruism that flourished as money

seemed so free-flowing. This climate allowed the academic mind great freedom to debate and to partially implement the ideas it generated in the expectation of triumph over contenders in the combat characterizing the intellectual world. Through creating humanities and social science divisions, York attempted to move beyond the tight control exercised internally by traditional disciplines. Interdisciplinarity is the keynote today due to advances in areas such as microbiology, but neither Saywell nor Horn proves that interdisciplinary courses and programs in the humanities and social sciences were inherently pedagogically better than past practice. Much in the pedagogy of higher education gets formulated on a wing and a prayer, particularly changes such as these that allowed handling larger numbers of students at less cost. Michiel Horn's subtitle, *The Way Must be Tried*, suggests also other departures at York such as an innovative teacher education program that avoided the excessive formalism and rigidity of the past. So, too, did the formation of an impressive faculty of fine arts that helped Canada get over the bleak history of performance amateurism described so lovingly by Maria Tippett in her 1990 book on the making of Canadian culture.

Indicative of a less attractive image were York's initial difficulties in attracting and keeping students. This emphasis on students and their retention was largely new during the 1960s as finances became tied more significantly to government grants, but York did not do well at first and I remember welcoming with amusement the annual flow of York refugees to the University of Guelph each year. Growing out of the University of Toronto to the Glendon campus as a small liberal arts school on Bayview Avenue, York did not manage to successfully reconcile colleges and student residences with academic units as it moved to the huge Keele Street campus. As York grew to be Canada's third largest university, repeated inquiries failed to rationalize the university's structures, or reconcile big size with the intimate educational experience hoped for at the beginning.

A stunning black and white photograph on the dust jacket for Saywell's book features York's first president, the ebullient Murray Ross, seated in tie and jacket at a desk with only a telephone, in the midst of a field. The grass tufts among the snow patches surrounding Ross suggest maple leaves, but the farmland stretching endlessly evokes desolation. Initial hopes for York's distinctiveness even in name evaporated when the University of York started up in northern England in 1963. Pesky but always persistent realities of personalities and conflicting structures intervened early, dampening expectations. The ideals expounded by Ross and the non-fulfillment of many of his promises produced disillusionment. Forecasts of declining student numbers for the 1970s and declines in provincial funding led to piranha-like mutilations as York struggled to adjust by downsizing expectations and reducing its budgets and personnel. With the acrimony preceding David Slater's resignation as the university's second president, in 1973, and Saywell's own departure as dean, this book completes the arc of its tragedy. "University politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small," American secretary of state Henry Kissinger once argued, cynically forgetting the human fallout.

As York grew, it became easier to excel in some areas such as commerce education where the Seymour Schulich School of Business acquired standing and joined the

considerable reputation of Osgoode Hall Law School. Whether academic standards for admission and graduation improved generally is not discussed by either author. Both Horn's and Saywell's accounts are best seen as older university histories almost uninfluenced by the statistical trend developed in the second half of the twentieth century. York University Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus Jack Granatstein, often more rhetorician than historian, was condemnatory in print about his institution, for poor quality students and weak instruction, but also for a faculty union that he had helped to found and that he claimed had become a protector of mediocrity. Severe labour conflicts occurred in 1984 and 1985, but the bitter faculty strike that lasted fifty-five days beginning on 20 March 1997 besmirched the university's reputation. After the long strike by the Canadian Union of Public Employees between 2000 and 2001, Horn suggests labour peace but his manuscript got caught in a time warp during which the most recent extended CUPE strike occurred. Neither does the genre of Horn's grand narrative allow this author to enter into gory details—that Saywell sometimes displays too amply—such as the board of governors showing York's first woman president, historian Susan Mann, to the door as the scapegoat arising from the 1997 conflict.

Both these books on York reveal the vast complexities of a vital institution in our society, so peculiar that it can barely be governed effectively or summarized readily in a review. Towards the end of his book, John Saywell engages in a *mea culpa* when he confesses that his term as dean was intensely personal, with few policy papers produced or few planning studies undertaken. Universities do not have standard procedures manuals; rules vary enormously and most institutions just grope their way in a direction they hope is right. Tribalism and territorialism within and without are influential but often so conflicting as to be only rarely determining. These two books by distinguished historians enable us to understand the university better and they will be used by those who want to place universities in their larger national and global settings.