

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

Ralph Heintzman, ed.  
*Tom Symons: A Canadian Life*

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2011. 488 pp.

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Tom Symons suspected that something was up when a host of local dignitaries gathered to celebrate the first convocation of Peterborough's Sacred Heart College in early 2012. At one point in the ceremony, it was announced that the Pope had made Symons a Knight of the Order of St. Sylvester in recognition of his work to make the idea of a Catholic college into a reality. As a member of the order, Symons is allowed to ride a horse inside Saint Peter's Basilica, although it is difficult to imagine him ever exercising this admittedly fun privilege. It's not his style. Never a showman and always a gentleman, his style involves building bridges and making things happen, not riding a horse through one of the holiest sites in the Catholic world.

Ralph Heintzman describes *A Canadian Life* as a *festschrift* of sorts. Like all *festschriften*, it is a collection of essays, but each essay addresses an aspect of one man's remarkable career. And because they are arranged more or less chronologically, 'they add up to a professional biography' (p. 1).

Born and raised in Toronto, educated at Crescent School, the University of Toronto, and Oxford, Symons became, at just 34 years old, the founding president of Trent University in 1963. It was a key moment in Canadian history: the Quiet Revolution and the Other Quiet Revolution were re-making the country along new, bilingual, and multicultural lines. As part of Canada's decolonization, Lester Pearson proposed a new flag to replace the old Red Ensign. Reflecting, perhaps, his UEL roots, Symons signed an open letter objecting to a new flag on the grounds that it inspired 'indifference' and negated the sum of Canadian history. The maple leaf, the letter said, was 'innocuous,' 'insipid,' 'tepid,' and 'mild': 'We are not in the position of a country with a revolutionary tradition, creating itself anew; we exist because we have inherited the past without revolutionary upheaval.'

Yet, as president of a new university unburdened by the dead weight of tradition, Symons brilliantly linked Trent to the larger re-invention of Canada through his

commitment to bilingualism at Champlain College and the *Journal of Canadian Studies* and through an innovative curriculum that included Native studies and Northern studies. And as a member of the Ontario Advisory Committee on Confederation, Symons encouraged the expansion of French-language rights for Franco-Ontarians and greater openness to Quebec, proposing what eventually became the Ontario-Quebec Cultural, Educational and Technical Agreement to facilitate exchanges between Canada's two most populous provinces. Symons also displayed a long and principled commitment to 'Canada's evolving multicultural and multiracial identity' (p. 90) through the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the Association of Commonwealth Universities, and the United World Colleges movement.

Leaving the president's office in 1972, Symons threw himself into a host of new challenges. He authored *To Know Ourselves*, the influential report on the state of Canadian studies; he sat on multiple boards, including the Arctic Institute of North America, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, and the National Statistics Council; and, he served as a key policy advisor to Robert Stanfield. Tom McMillan's account of the 1974 election and Trudeau's monstrous campaign of cynicism is pretty wonderful stuff: 'That election was one of those in which, if you were a Tory and Moses or a Grit and Jack the Ripper, it would not have made a Mount Sinai or London back-alley's bit of difference: your fate, for good or ill, was sealed as fast as Trudeau could say, "Zap you're frozen!"' (p. 161).

If I had to choose my favourite essay, it would be 'Transformative Leadership: Tom Symons and a New Vision of Human Rights,' by Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella. As an appreciation of his leadership skills and of his commitment to human rights, it reminds us that Canada's post-1945 rights revolution came from men and women determined to build a more decent and tolerant country. Take the case of John Damien, a racing steward fired by the Ontario Racing Commission in 1975 for no other reason than he was gay. Although the Ontario Human Rights Commission did not send his case to a Board of Inquiry, Symons proceeded to recommend the inclusion of sexual orientation in Ontario's human rights legislation as a prohibited ground of discrimination in an 'historic report' called *Life Together* (p. 220). 'There can be no doubt,' the report stated, 'that homosexual men and women suffer from frequent and extensive discrimination because of their sexual orientation... individuals have been fired or denied accommodation, or have in many other ways suffered indignities, simply because they are homosexuals. This is deplorable in a society which claims, as its public policy, that "every person is free and equal in dignity and rights."' Describing *Life Together* as one of Symons' 'greatest legacies,' Abella also speculates that, at the time, it may have cost him his renewal as Chair (p. 220). But if change came from the top, it also came from the bottom. It came from the countless gay men and women who said enough is enough. It came from the Gay Alliance Towards Equality; it came from the Coalition for Gay Rights of Ontario and the National Gay Rights Coalition; and it came from the Committee to Defend John Damien.

When Symons' biography is written, this *festschrift* of sorts will serve as a convenient entry point into the larger social history of post-1945 Canada. However, his biographer will be hard-pressed to find a better title than *Tom Symons: A Canadian Life*.

One contributor suggested *Tom Symons: Just A Great Man*. Perhaps. But *A Canadian Life* captures Symons' many contributions to Canada's transformation from an ethnically British nation with a French-speaking province to a bilingual, multicultural nation with a deep commitment to equality, or its transformation from the Red Ensign to the maple leaf.

Maybe Symons should ride a horse through Saint Peter's Basilica after all. He deserves a little fun.