

D'Arcy Jenish

*Trent University: Celebrating 50 Years of Excellence*

Toronto: ECW Press, 2014. 239 pp.

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Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario, is the iconic example of a Canadian university that sought, ironically, to reform higher education in the 1960s by reaching deeply into the past. It set out to re-create Oxbridge, or at least an idealized version of it. Tom Symons, Trent's founding president, loved the intimacy and sense of community he experienced as an Oxford student, and disliked the culture of growth—"elephantitis," he called it—which pervaded North American higher education, including that in Ontario, in the post-war period. Trent's history, in large measure, is how, in the face of various external and internal forces, the university became something other than a serene Oxford on the Otonabee River.

D'Arcy Jenish, a journalist, not an academic, was commissioned by Trent to tell its story in light of its fiftieth anniversary in 2014. In the genre of university histories, which range from scholarly tomes on the one hand, to extended promotional pamphlets on the other, this book, as David Hayes notes in a recent *University Affairs* article,<sup>1</sup> is a hybrid: a heavily illustrated coffee table volume that celebrates the university while recounting some of its endemic problems.

Before breaking ground in the early 1960s, Trent's founders, like those of other new universities, had to do the necessary political spadework. At the tender age of thirty-one, Symons had "impeccable" credentials—he was "Anglican, Conservative, and well connected politically" (34), and he effectively elicited the support of the provincial government, Peterborough's local politicians, General Electric (which donated \$1.6 million to the campus building fund), and Pete Howe, a communist, who headed the city's largest union. Everyone, it appeared, supported higher education in the boom years. Notwithstanding major enrolment pressures in Ontario, which produced the dreaded elephantitis, there was still room—and money—for small, alternative educational initiatives, like Trent's residential college system in which every

student had a faculty mentor. The new buildings, designed by architect Ron Thom, were widely praised for their imaginative, pedestrian-friendly character—a stark contrast to the hideous functionalism of other university structures newly emerging across the continent, though Trent, eventually, built one of those as well.

Jenish recounts the enthusiasm, academic creativity, and loyalty of students and staff that infused the campus. This narrative, indeed, dominates the book. Trent could not afford to retain most elements of the Oxford model (save the annual rowing regatta), but over the years, it distinguished itself in other ways, particularly in the fields of Canadian, Aboriginal, and Environmental Resource Studies. It entered the worlds of graduate education and research, and by contemporary metrics, its faculty has done fairly well in the latter area. However, its claim to distinctiveness as an “interdisciplinary” university that nourishes “critical thinking” and “social justice” is harder to sustain: these terms commonly appear in university mission statements elsewhere.

Trent, however, has another side that the book tracks as a kind of parallel story. Almost from the outset, it was riven with internal conflict and financial problems. The university seems to have been perpetually in debt since the late 1960s, a situation compounded by undulating enrolments, a provincial funding formula that did not favour undergraduate humanities and social sciences, and several expensive faculty strikes for which there were political costs as well. Symon’s successor, Tom Nind, described his job “as a negative one—cutting, scrimping, delaying, denying...” (53). Another president, Leonard Conolly, resigned in 1997 after only three years, worn out by a long strike, and was replaced on an interim basis by David Smith, retired principal of Queen’s University, whose main job was to turn the campus temperature down.

Trent’s longest serving president, Bonnie Patterson, promoted academic diversification, which led to an innovative DNA Profiling and Forensic Centre, as well as a centre for biomaterial research. But she too was embroiled in major conflict over the consolidation of the college system, and the closing down of Peter Robinson College, a legacy downtown facility. Her critics included Tom Symons.

The book provides numerous snapshots of Trent, both positive and negative, but the episodes are not well integrated or sufficiently explained. Trent is not Oxford, but what has it become? A diamond in the rough-and-tumble world of Canadian higher education? A small-town university with big, unfulfilled aspirations? An ungovernable campus that still elicits great fidelity from faculty and students? Are its paradoxes and tensions typical of the modern university or distinctive? The author has produced a readable chronicle that is more than a pamphlet but less than a profound contribution to the literature. The questions remain.

## Notes

- 1 David Hayes, “The Hard Task of Writing a University History,” *University Affairs* (online). 11 February 2015. <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/hard-task-writing-university-history/> Accessed 17 July 2015.