Bissell's "Great, Good Place"
and the History of Higher Education in Canada:
Reflections on the Symposium

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Over the all too many years it took to research and to write *Matters of Mind*: *The University in Ontario, 1791-1951* (1994), one of my greatest regrets was the fact that no general history of the University of Toronto had appeared since the 1920s. Appointed University Historian by his good friend Claude Bissell, former professor of English Robin S. Harris had been mandated to produce a comprehensive history of the University of Toronto. But by the 1980s Harris had reached the conclusion—or so rumour had it—that no adequate history of any university of over 6,000 students could be written. The University of Toronto had reached this point by the early twentieth century. Harris threw up his hands in surrender. And so the University of Toronto history project faltered, and continued to falter, as I began to reach those chapters of my own book that dealt with higher education in Ontario after the Great War.

The increasing attention I gave to the University of Toronto for the period after 1918 reflected of course its growing importance and influence in Canadian higher education. I had direct experience of this. My undergraduate education at the University of Manitoba was peppered with professors sent by people like A.S.P. Woodhouse or Donald Creighton to the regional "colonies" of the nation. The manner of these men reflected, at times, a wistful yearn to return to the imperial heartland, and this did not escape even the naïve undergraduate. But the amount of historical detail *Matters of Mind* afforded to the University of Toronto also reflected my decision that if a comprehensive history of the University of Toronto was not going to be written in my lifetime (as I then thought), much less before the deadline for submission of my manuscript, I would damn well provide for others as much of what I had come to know about the institution—even if this risked distorting the overall cast of the book. If only one graduate student published some serious research on an aspect of the University of Toronto's history my book helped reveal, I thought the gamble would have paid off. I did not remotely expect that the U of T

history project would assume new life, or that it would then take the vigorous direction marked by Martin Friedland and his co-workers. The choice of Friedland, as we all now know, was an inspired one—and his magisterial history has left us profoundly in his debt.

Back in 1989, a year that truly marked the end of an epoch if not a century, Paul Axelrod and John Reid posed a historiographical challenge to scholars of higher education in Canada, urging them—well, *us*—to move beyond the top-down "view from the president's office" notion of university history. They urged us, instead, to approach our subjects in ways that reflected recent directions taken by the profession—in particular, the turn to social history, including the history of women's experience. The essays in *Youth, University and Canadian Society* attempted to live up to their wishes. They incorporated social, women's, youth, and even a little intellectual history.[1] And Paul Axelrod's historiographical survey for this symposium has pointed to ways taken, and works published, over the dozen years since then. I think it can fairly be said that the reorientation of the history of higher education he and Reid called for has taken place. Most histories of university life in Canada now incorporate as much social as institutional history; few can now ignore the realm of the social.

In his charming memoir, *Halfway Up Parnassus*, former Toronto President Claude Bissell reflected affectionately on the "great, good place" the University of Toronto had become by the time he himself became a student at it.[2] These were years, beginning in the early 1930s and lasting until the late 1950s, when, in Bissell's nostalgic and romanticized view, the University of Toronto had "centeredness," a combination of community and *gravitas*, a sense of collegiality and fellowship. An "ivory tower," in Bissell's view, in the best sense: free from acrimony, from student unrest, and from professorial dissension. And it was a place, as Martin Friedland's new history and other recent scholarship indicates, that never truly existed. Even so, its wistful traces continue to serve as the not-too-hidden subtext of polemics such as Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein's *The Great Brain Robbery*

1 Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989).

2 Claude T. Bissell, *Halfway Up Parnassus: A Personal Account of the University of Toronto, 1932-1971* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1974).

in 1984 and Granatstein's more recent diatribe *Who Killed Canadian History?* in 1998.[3]

History is seldom well served by nostalgia, and this is especially the case with the history of universities. Yet the history of higher education, almost always written by university-educated people, is especially susceptible to nostalgia's sepia-tinted charms. It is often very difficult, even for the most "objectivity-conscious" historian, not in some way to construct a "great, good place" of some sort, of some time. It is difficult, for example, not to measure earlier or later generations against the days of one's own university education. In too many of our accounts of universities, either the past or the present is bleak. Sometimes we emphasize liberation from prejudice and inequality and outmoded forms of thought, and at others we chart higher education's subordination to the dictates of the state, the reduction of professor to employee, or of student to consumer. Yet almost inevitably, when we either romanticize or demonize, we risk falling back into what Paul Axelrod has characterized as the "struggle and survival" mode. Either way, we remain halfway up Parnassus, and either way we risk having trajectories of either improvement or declension in mind. In this, I am by no means blameless.

This is perhaps less problematic with "case studies" on particular aspects of higher education. In them, the overarching meta-narrative of rise or decline has decidedly less chance to come into play, for attention to detail is a good antidote to both nostalgia and unwarranted criticism. But we still need to be wary of creating our own great, good places—or bad ones—when we shift to broad accounts of institutions as a whole or of university systems. What, then, might serve in the place of such overarching teleological categories as "Progress and Decline," or functionalist variants such as "Struggle and Survival" or "Challenge and Response"?

Here I want to suggest two fruitful directions we might consider. I think they might help address the problem of institutional and social trajectories and at the same time provide us with a means of re-situating ourselves as historians of higher education within the still-shifting historiographical terrain of the years since Axelrod and Reid penned their clarion call to varieties of social history.

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3   David Jay Bercuson, Robert Bothwell, and J.L. Granatstein, *The Great Brain Robbery: Canada's Universities on the Road to Ruin* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984); J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998).

In the late 1970s, Tony Becher, a professor of philosophy at the University of Sussex, came across an unpublished paper by Clifford Geertz, the American champion of what is now known as "interpretive anthropology."   The paper was called "Towards an Ethnography of the Disciplines."   In it, later expanded and published in his 1983 book *Local Knowledge*, Geertz sought to give the same kind of ethnographic attention to forms of contemporary North American belief and practice he had earlier provided to Malaysian tribes.[4]   Inspired by Geertz, and by T.S. Kuhn, in the course of his reading Becher came across a passage in a book by anthropologist F.G. Bailey, *Mortality and Expediency*.[5] Bailey's words eventually served as Becher's opening epigraph:

> Each tribe has a name and a territory, settles its own
> affairs, goes to war with the others, has a distinct language
> or at least a distinct dialect and a variety of ways of
> demonstrating its apartness from others.

Challenged in this way, Becher decided, as he put it, "to develop more actively my interest in mapping the variegated territory of academic knowledge and in exploring the diverse characteristics of those who inhabit and cultivate it" (p. xi).   Why should the high-powered market- and consumer-driven industrial and post-industrial world be exempt from the same kind of anthropological scrutiny and analysis already afforded to "primitive" societies, for example by studying their "natural communities" or their "life cycles"?

Over the next decade, Becher subjected members of a number of disciplines in the arts, social sciences, and sciences in several British universities, and one in the United States, to systematic scrutiny by means of surveys, site visits, wide reading, and personal interviews. The result, published in 1989, was Becher's *Academic*

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4 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge; Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
5 F.G. Bailey, *Mortality and Expediency* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977). See also T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Tribes and Territories; Intellectual Enquiry and the Culture of Disciplines.[6]   It is a remarkable book.

One of the virtues of Becher's ethnographic approach, and one that I think should be of particular interest to the historian of higher education, was that it circumvented the conventional categories of understanding university life. Becher did not view universities as medieval institutions persisting into modernity, or as expressions of that modernity with traces of inherited archaic structures. Instead, he treated them as a good anthropologist treats any social and cultural system of belief and practice, anywhere and at any time.

Tribes of any sort establish territories, defend them, and under certain circumstances invade the territories of others. They create boundaries, at times overlapping ones. They establish areas of common ground. Tribes specialize, whether they are of the hunter-gatherer or the entrepreneurial-academic variety. They develop their own languages, their own linguistic codes, their own arcane vocabularies intended to impress and to exclude.   All tribes establish pecking orders, have elites, worship Great Men and appoint gate-keepers.   Systems of belief and actual practice between cultural systems, in short, prove more similar on close inspection than one might assume. The most "primitive" of tribes has its own form of "peer review."

So it is between and within universities, and Becher scrutinized them with distinctly un-Whiggish eyes.   The result is a diachronic approach to universities and their histories that we can nevertheless incorporate into historical practice to chart change over time. This "academic tribes and territories" approach has several advantages. First, it avoids teleology, for it sees "rise" and "decline" to be the normative—and therefore deeply problematic—terms they are. Secondly, it brings processes too often implicit or even ignored in our accounts of academic cultures into sharp focus. Third, it points in the direction of culture.

Let me provide one concrete example. "Cultural dispersion" has long been a process of deep interest to anthropologists: the spread of cultures in earlier centuries, for example, and the commingling, control, and resistance this has entailed. Well, I await the enterprising (and probably young) historian who will trace the

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6 Tony Becher, *Academic Tribes and Territories; Intellectual Enquiry and the Cultures of Disciplines* (Milton Keynes: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1989). The English universities included Bristol, Cambridge, Exeter, Brighton, and Essex; the American was the University of California, Berkeley.

graduate students supervised by Harold Innis, Donald Creighton, Maurice Careless, and Carl Berger over the period 1945 to 1995. I'm looking forward to examining the dispersion map (if there exists such a thing) that will highlight the universities and cities in which those students later gained appointments. The detailed, analytical text accompanying elements of the map will have examined and assessed the history courses and curricula these Toronto graduates created once they had reached the colonies.

A number of years ago, in his presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, on doctoral theses produced in 1967 and 1985, William Acheson gave us tantalizing hints at how fruitful this approach to the dispersion of disciplinary culture and its attendant interpretive influence could be—but it marked merely a beginning.[7] We could do much more. Imagine for a moment those Toronto history grads as a number of larger or smaller circles on the map—coloured, of course, Royal Blue. The more U of T people on staff, the larger the circle. Outposts of academic empire. Then think of other sets of circles, representing doctoral students produced by those universities that developed doctoral programs in history, especially after 1970. Our enterprising scholar will also have studied the courses *they* developed, and will have compared their orientation with those offered at the University of Toronto.

This is where the historian finally gets to dream in technicolour, like the Film Studies folks. For there are those Toronto and non-Toronto graduates, on the map, in several fascinating hues. The Baby Blue ones are those trained by the Royal Blue fellows in the "new universities," and they have won their own symbolic colour because when they dispersed to the colonies they often turned out to be pale imitations of the Genuine Article back near University Avenue. Many other "new university" circles, large and small, would be "Blood Red," of course, to represent the New Left social history orientation of most such places. There they are, too, on the map—right over the cities where their academic posts are located—sometimes alone, at other times competing for space with the blue circles. And if we compared dispersion maps focused on 1945, 1955, 1965, through 1995—we would see, at first, the diffusion of Royal Blue and the birth of Baby Blue; and then we would see the red circles increase in number, slowly at first, and

7 William Acheson, "Doctoral Theses and the Discipline of History in Canada, 1967 and 1985," Presidential Address of the Canadian Historical Association, 1986. This is available on-line at http://www.cha-shc.ca/bilingue/addresses/1986.htm

then multiplying rapidly—an academic metastasis, either malig-
nant or life-saving depending on our affinity for blue or red. In a
large inset map of Toronto itself, the space south of Eglinton would
be almost solid blue, while up near Keele Street we would see a
clash of Blue and Red not witnessed since the Battle of the Plains
of Abraham.

You think I jest? Well, only in part. A serious and well-
conceived version of this intentionally simplistic dispersion map,
with its accompanying analytical text, would provide us with a
very helpful visual representation of dominant and resistant
interpretive stances within Canadian historiography.[8] Do that over
time, watch the number of blue circles become surrounded and
often overtaken by red ones (which remarkably begin to fade to
pink after 1989), and you will have one means of literally charting
a challenge to one institution's intellectual power and influence,
and also a revolution in Canadian historiography.   A visual
representation, in time and space, of the actual decline and fall of
the Creightonian "Empire of the St. Lawrence."

Academic tribes and territories? You bet.

Earlier, I indicated that I wanted to suggest "a means of re-
situating ourselves as historians of higher education within the
shifting historiographical terrain" of the past decade or so.
Becher's unique and fresh approach to academic cultures leads in
this direction too.   For not only does it provide us with new
questions to ask, it also is grounded in "the relationship between
people and ideas." In short, as with the drift of Clifford Geertz's
interpretive anthropology as a whole, it shifts attention to the
mental environment in which cultural meaning is generated.
Becher's central contention is "that the ways in which particular
groups of academics organize their professional lives are intimately
related to the intellectual tasks on which they are engaged." One
can, and should, "seek to draw a distinction between the social
aspects of knowledge communities and the epistemological
properties of knowledge forms," but in doing so one will soon see
"how the two influence one another" (p. 2). This leads to the
second suggested direction we might consider.

The past thirty years, the heyday of social history, witnessed
abundant attention to the various "social aspects of knowledge
communities." In Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Mrs. Willie

8 For many examples of visual representation of intellectual influence, see the figures in
Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Loman insists that "attention must be paid" to her late husband. It is the one debt owed to him. We have long since studied social and ideological structures, and this steady gaze has issued dividends. But we now have some historiographical critical distance from the rise and influence of the New Social History, and more than one historian has concluded of late that it reached a kind of interpretive impasse by the decade of the 1990s, if not earlier. "Social structure," like "number," proved to have certain limitations. Attention must be paid, this time to sites of meaning.

In 2001, an article by William H. Sewell, Jr. appeared in a volume called *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five years of Interpretive Social Science*. Entitled "Whatever Happened to the 'Social' in Social History?," the article began with the words "Social History as an intellectual project is in crisis."[9] With its concern for social structures and the quantitative methods used for studying them, Sewell noted, social history rose in the 1960s and 1970s to a position of dominance within the profession. At the time, "social structures" had been assumed to be "objective and transpersonal patterns of forces of which actors were at best incompletely aware and which tightly constrained their actions and thoughts." Along with this assumption came a disdain for traditional narrative history. So the social historians of the 1960s and 1970s turned for their models, as often as not, to sociology, political science, economics, and geography. The New Social History became an eclectic mixture of the French *Annales* school, British Marxism, and American quantitative empiricism.

And yet even by the mid-1970s some of these social historians recognized that social history had serious limits. They knew about social constraints and social forces that shaped people's lives, all right, but the methods they had chosen did little for understanding how people actually made sense of these forces and constraints, and grappled with them. The use of hard data did not really address questions of meaning and motivation—a problem that surely helps explain the frenetic quest to discover "agency" wherever later social historians thought they might find it. In short, social history had largely ignored the question of culture—the environment in which meaning is created.

This accounts, in part, for why some of them (like Bryan D. Palmer and Gregory S. Kealey) turned to British "cultural Marx-

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9 In *Schools of Thought: Twenty-Five Years of Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Joan W. Scott and Debra Keates (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2001), 209.

ism," while others (like Tony Becher and William Sewell) looked to forms of anthropological understanding, especially to the work of "symbolic anthropologists" like Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner.[10] The overall effect was that it drew attention to the realm of the symbolic—to the social and cultural practices which occupy the realm of meaning. This in turn forged links to intellectual history, for intellectual historians had always been concerned with such issues.

This increase of attention to the cultural in the context of the social brought into play interpretive methods that could uncover systems of meaning, such as Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling."[11] And these kinds of structures were no less real or far-reaching in their implications than the social ones uncovered by quantitative research. Secondly, in shifting attention toward the cultural in this way, historians began to restore to history a place for meaning in thought, belief, and action that had often been ridiculed when the "new social historians" of the 1960s and 1970s talked about intellectual history. Largely marginalized in the heyday of the New Social History, this reorientation in historiography is now all around us, for example in Jonathan *Vance's Death So Noble* (1997) or in H.V. Nelles's *The Art of Nation-Building* (1999)—books literally inconceivable three decades ago.[12]

Our own field of study, for all its decided advances, is by comparison conceptually static. We still have much to do in order to establish the actual facts and experiences of Canadian academic life. We must continue to strip away inaccuracy, conjecture, and unexamined assumption. Our attention to the analytical categories of social history—institutional structures, social groups, demography, and so forth—has borne much fruit, but how significantly have we expanded our methods beyond those urged upon us by Axelrod and Reid a dozen years ago? We need to think more about the ways meaning is generated within academic life—how it is cultivated, mediated, contested, resisted, and reconstituted. This will involve looking at evidence with new questions and with fresh eyes, but it will first require a frank evaluation of our own operat-

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10 See, for example, Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1975).

11 A phrase that recurs as a central theme in Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973).

12 Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997); H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

ing assumptions, both disciplinary and personal As the English historian of political philosophy, Quentin Skinner, has recently suggested,

> If we accept that the social and political world is inter-preted through and through, and that there may be many conflicting yet defensible interpretations circulating at any one time, we must apply that thought to ourselves as well. We cannot consistently speak about different defensible interpretations while uniquely privileging our own partic-ular body of beliefs. We have to see ourselves as one tribe among others.[13]

To understand the past, we need to address more directly the question of meaning, and to do this adequately a theoretically informed critical attitude is not quite enough. Along with it, we need also to cultivate something that the youthful and exuberant New Social History of the 1960s and 1970s often neglected or even derided: an empathetic understanding of other "tribes" and earlier generations.[14] If the history of the twentieth century has taught us anything, it is that recent peoples and generations can claim little if any intellectual, ethical, or moral superiority over their forebears. So, too, it is with higher education. If the heart of the history of meaning is located anywhere, it is perhaps best found in universities. To understand how meaning is created, sustained, and altered we need to pay greater heed to the cultural within the context of the social. We need to enjoin social and ideological processes and structures to cultural and intellectual ones. We need to do all of this and more if we wish to understand, in the sweep of time, the interaction of people and ideas in Canadian universities and the tribes and territories they inhabit.

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13 Quentin Skinner, "Political Theory after the Enlightenment Project," in *Schools of Thought*, ed. Scott and Keates, 22.

14   For discussion of the problem, see Donald Wright's contribution to this sym-posium, "Donald Creighton: A Life in History, or Writing Biography in the Age of Anxiety." A similarly empathetic account of Creighton, and others of his generation, can be found in Philip Massolin, *Canadian Intellectuals, the Tory Tradition, and the Challenge of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). For the same interpretive problem set in a wider context, see Phillip Buckner, "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?" Presidential Address, Canadian Historical Association, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1994); also available on-line at: http://www.cha-shc.ca/bilingue/addresses/1993.htm   The problem of "Whig History" scarcely disappeared with a later generation's repudiation of the approaches of Donald Creighton and A.R.M. Lower.