

All our Academic Yesterdays, or Scanning Harris

R. S. Harris.

A HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA, 1663-1960.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976.
715 pp. \$37.50 (cloth).

Approximately one year ago a circular arrived from the University of Toronto Press announcing the publication of two works by Robin Harris. One was a re-issue of an earlier (1958) work, "The Undergraduate Essay," a re-issue no doubt occasioned by the increasing clamour, especially from west of Ontario, about the poverty of expression and the very inability on the part of freshmen students to construct sentences let alone arrange them into reasonable approximations to paragraphs and essays. The second publication announced was the long promised, eagerly awaited, much delayed "History of Higher Education in Canada." But even now pleasure was to be postponed further — the book was not in stock and a second printing was to be completed before I could purchase a copy.

The linking together of the two titles by the Press might have been wholly fortuitous, but not the history of each. At the time that Harris was working upon "The Undergraduate Essay," he had recently graduated from the University of Michigan with a doctoral degree based upon the study of 'General Education' at university level in Canadian universities and had already conceived the idea of a comparative study of Canadian higher education. He was concerned, as were, and are, many Canadians who have pursued doctoral studies in neighbouring states of the United States, to demonstrate to themselves, and to the discomfiture of their recent hosts who had remained imperceptive of the fact, that Canadian universities are different from their American counterparts; different not only in size, in scale of fees charged, in origin, but in sufficient other major ways, as to be perceived as intrinsically different.

Harris himself was a product and a part of that epoch which almost saw the extinction of the humanities in Canadian universities under the impact of war (for such was the proposal taken to the Federal government by a former Principal of this university). It was in reaction to this proposal that the Humanities Research Council had been established, and since no one knew with any precision what was the status of the various disciplines in all of the fifteen widely dispersed

Canadian universities, the recently established body had empowered two native sons of Port Hope, Watson Kirkconnell and Arthur J. P. Woodhouse (both born in 1895) — who had university teaching experience in Manitoba and Ontario and who were destined to achieve eminence in Canadian university life and affairs — to conduct the first such survey in Canada. Their report, published in 1947, was a landmark event in Canadian academic affairs. Its method involved the study of university calendars, the use of visiting committees, and the drawing upon regional and extra-regional informants for confirmation and elaboration of information gleaned from the Calendars. The funding was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation (\$8,000).

It will occasion no surprise therefore to find that when Harris set out to study "The Place of English Studies in a University Program of General Education (based upon the practices in English speaking universities and colleges in Canada in 1951-52)", he should model his approach on that of his mentors, Woodhouse and Kirkconnell; but that in deference to his American advisers he should also consider the Harvard Report on General Education in a Free Society, the President's Committee findings, and the reports of the Modern Languages Association of the U.S.A. He studied the calendars available in Toronto, and visited all thirty of the colleges and universities then extant, for further confirmation. Since his major reference was to Canadian universities, it was incumbent upon him to show in what way they were different from American ones. Like the Kirkconnell and Woodhouse report earlier, he found the major difference to lie in the honours courses available — just as they, in turn, had found pleasure in a still earlier report by Learned and Sills to the Carnegie Corporation in 1922 on "Education in the Maritime Provinces of Canada," which had indicated that "a genuine honours curriculum is one of the precious features of English and Canadian universities that should constantly be held uppermost in planning new departures in higher education."

Of the teaching of English, Harris found that overworked departments of English had to concentrate too much of their time on the development of language skills, to be able to devote much time to the reading of great literature or to the study of the language itself. Given this state of affairs, his text "The Undergraduate Essay" was a very notable contribution for English departments, and its reappearance now is highly commendable.

Another Canadian identity crisis

Meanwhile the comparative study of Canadian higher education which he had conceived was broadened in scope by newer thoughts. He had a notion to study formative influences in Europe and to place the Canadian experience in parallel with Australian experience during the same periods. However, even had it been possible to complete this

project on that scale and with the resources then available to him, it is doubtful if the Canadian academic community would have been ready to receive it.

At that time academic interest in higher education had been roused by one of the continually recurring Canadian identity crises, which had seen the federal government concerned in 1949 about national life, national feeling, and the promotion of common understanding, and had instituted a search for institutions which did or could add to the variety and richness of Canadian life. It was the Massey Commission which had provided a focus. The four academics and the civil engineer who constituted its membership were promptly besieged by every available academic body urging that universities were national institutions and that they could not be left out from its terms of reference. It is rumoured that whilst the government was pondering and considering a per capita payment of \$2.00 to each province to be divided among the universities in proportion to their enrolment, a committee of university Principals importuned for fifty cents, and the government in relief conceded that amount immediately. In 1956 the raising of the amount to \$1.00 per capita and its distribution amongst universities by a non-governmental body meant a change in function for the National Conference of Canadian Universities and Colleges, and the consequent incorporation of the Canadian Universities Foundation to handle such funds. The establishment of the Canada Council, and the forecast of massive enrolment increases, meant that higher education in Canada had become big business, but big business without adequate policies. Its advertising campaign had been successful but what did it have to sell, and what did it hold in stock?

Thus, the time was ripe for a second application of the formula which had worked before, the Kirkconnell-Woodhouse formula. The NCCUC decided to obtain studies concerned with many aspects of university education of previous years, and eventually of current times. Its first action was to secure backing from the Carnegie Corporation and then to obtain two individuals, destined for eminence, to perform the chores. Robin Harris from the University of Toronto and Arthur Tremblay from Université de Laval were given the task of preparing the first bibliography of higher education in Canada. This was the first of a series of publications, the seventh of which is the present volume, *A History of Higher Education in Canada, 1663-1960*. A further volume bringing the history up to the present time is to follow; it may have to wait Harris' completion of "*A History of the University of Toronto*," initiated when he was made the official historian of that university.

The academic community stands in debt to Robin Harris, and to his major editorial officer, Gwen Pilkington, who, between them have contributed so much to our understanding of our intellectual heritage, and have compressed so much into the present compass, which, even

with a reduced type face of IBM Elite 72 still extends to over 700 pages. On the other hand Harris owes a small debt to his readers who have waited patiently for so long, and have in no wise attempted to invade the field, which by almost universal Canadian consent had been reserved for him from the moment of his success with the first bibliography. During this interval he has been actively engaged on almost every committee dealing with university affairs in Ontario, and in an age when every committee corresponds with every other established committee, he must have been privy to a great deal of university policy advice if not policy making throughout Canada. This whets our appetite for the succeeding volume which will bring us up to date, but in no way diminishes our respect for this present work.

The volume is divided into five sections of about equal length, the shortest section being of 92 pages, the longest of 150, the shortest period covered in one section being twenty years and the longest, the two earliest periods, thirty years. There is therefore no great tendency to show that respect for antiquity which ignores the present, nor concern for topicality or recency which increases the length of treatment logarithmically or exponentially. Within the sections the same topics are treated, in so far as they are applicable. Thus we find our major sub-headings to be Institutional Development. Arts and Science, Professional Education, Graduate Studies, and Scholarship and Research. Each section notes as its key event some event important for academic life or for the universities in general. Thus we begin with a note on the Royal Visit of 1860, at which the universities took the opportunity to press their claims for support and encouragement upon their Visitor, and we are invited to use this as a means of permitting a résumé of events which had preceded it. In like fashion the founding of the Royal Society of Canada, with its limited membership of elected Fellows, thus recognising merit if not excellence, marked the end of a second phase in 1890. The war years and the emerging importance of the Conference of Canadian Universities in the period to 1920 serves as a suitable marker for the end of that epoch. A Conference held at St. Lawrence University in New York State in 1939 is used to mark the end of the fourth phase, though its importance has been largely unnoticed by others. The fifth phase is marked by two events, the NCCUC conferences of 1956 and 1961, the one of hope and the other of despondency if not of despair, when university affairs were relegated to a lower degree of priority in the economic scheme of things. Although somewhat artificial, and rather arbitrary, the use of these terminal markers as introductions can be likened to the flash back of the cinema. We have seen what happened, now let us see how and why.

A question of methodology

We are told that the text can serve as a book, in which one may browse or read, and as a work of reference. Of the second there can be no doubt. It brings together not merely in summary form what may

not exist locally, otherwise than within its covers, but gives a perspective on the same affairs as well. Its primary reliance upon bibliographic sources we have noted as probably stemming from the crucial determinants of Harris' thought in the early 1950s. To this approach has been added the study, which Harris dismisses as 'scanning', of the various institutional and personal histories that have appeared over the years; at the very least it acts as a check upon the bibliographic sources of University Calendars, in which the University of Toronto Library is apparently so replete. In a sense Harris has raised the use of this combination of sources to a level comparable with man's first serious use of the statistical mean, as opposed to the 'havera' of the Phoenicians. The Calendar may not be exact but it is a 'measure' on which some value, some reliance may be placed. It contains within itself an error of measurement, but if other errors of measurement are in a contrary direction, we are left with a 'mean' value which is the best single estimate of what we are measuring.

At this stage, and in the absence of nonagenarians or still older individuals having unimpaired memory of what they once studied, or of sets of notes kept by students at the time, this is the best that we can expect. However, just as measures of central tendency have been displaced in importance by measures of variability, so we may find that, in the future, more detailed study may concern itself with the highly important differences between intentions reported in Calendars and actual events determined by intra-university political considerations. To achieve this without being reduced to trivia may be the measure of the quality of future educational history.

Harris' 'History' is a factual book. Of that there is no doubt. But facts need not be dry, are not of equal value, nor can they be easily separated nor completely distilled from their context. Their ordering may represent prevailing hypotheses, their hiatuses may be filled by ideological or philosophical entities supplied by the reader. Harris has given sufficient facts to satisfy most critics, in a manner far from dry, and has used his editorial skill to prevent or reduce repetition of the same facts in different contexts. Some redundancies may escape his attention, or may even be inevitable. For example, the celebrated earlier McGill adventure into Chinese Studies, arising from the temporary acceptance of a specific bequest, is treated in more than one context without giving the whole of the story. But that is a minor blemish. Harris has a broad canvas and he fills it well, with ideas rather than people, with trends rather than fixed lines of development, and achieves a symmetry of product and a continuity of themes sustained with a high level of interest throughout the more than seven hundred pages of running text — a truly remarkable effort.

The real test is now to follow. Will the present format, which in the late seventies enables us to appreciate and understand the pre-sixties, enable us to organize our knowledge of Canadian universities to help us meet the challenges of the eighties, with declining enrolments, reductions in resources, increasing provincial political control, new knowledge to absorb, and new student attitudes to plumb? Or will

we return to the pith of Cornford's *Microcosmographia*, which is held to epitomise university politics (either the time is not ripe, or it has all been tried before),* and remain immobile in the face of challenge? Will Harris himself be able to organize the data of the past twenty years, data with whose production he has had no small part, with the same success and within the same format in the volume which is to follow? Canadian academics owe no small debt to the Carnegie Corporation for the studies of Canadian academic history, life and problems; no small debt to the individuals who laboured on successive projects of their funding, and an especial debt to Robin Harris who has been associated for so long with so many. We now look forward eagerly to the early publication of the volume which is to follow.

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(Editor's note)

*F. M. Cornford. *Microcosmographia Academica, being a guide for the Young Academic Politician*. Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1908. A book remarkable for brevity (24 pp.) and wit; a precursor of Parkinson.

J. Roby Kidd and Gordon R. Selman, Editors.
COMING OF AGE:
CANADIAN ADULT EDUCATION IN THE 1960s.
Toronto: Canadian Association for Adult Education, 1978.
410 pp. \$8.95 paper

Coming of Age: Canadian Adult Education in the 1960s is a veritable smorgasbord of writings on adult education. Sixty-five authors whose contributions are arranged in six topical sections offer us a taste, but only a bite-sized taste in most cases, of the wide variety of written material produced in the adult field in the decade preceding our own. Of course, any anthology has its limitations, and this one is no exception. Not only is the considerable contribution of French Canada to the field of adult education left unexplored (as the preface indicates), but the unevenness in the nature of the contributions, ranging as they do from the peripheral to the profound, makes synthesis difficult. John Heron with his Bank Letter, Chief Dan George talking to teachers — each contribution admirable in its own way, no doubt, but what do they all add up to? A.S.R. Tweedie conjures with definitions of adult education one-fifth of the way through the book, and forty or so pages further on Coolie Vernor adds flesh to this skeleton in an excellent discussion of organizing concepts, so that gradually it is possible to arrive at a set of principles concerning the nature and scope of the subject as it was perceived in the 1960s. The arrangement of material in this anthology does not make it easy for anyone with a particular interest in the development of the foundations of adult education to do this, however. Nor will the teacher of adults looking to