

Rocke Robertson

Ten Years After

Was the student unrest of the Sixties a symptom of a political wave moving internationally across Western societies, or was it a sign of serious institutional decay in universities? Was there something wrong at McGill, and has it been put right? As history repeatedly shows, effects have seldom much to do with causes; the peace of today does not signal the resolution of yesterday's conflicts. Rocke Robertson talks from a frankly personal perspective about his own experiences and reflections as Principal during those years over which that wave, as he sees it, splashed and splashed again on our particular beach for a surprisingly lengthy span of time and to the considerable discomfort of the residents. He feels that the movement had salutary though temporary effects on the institutions attacked, and that much of the discontent was unfounded and wasteful of energies and emotions. He admits that the students had one legitimate grievance — in the quality of teaching.

I am glad to have the opportunity to review McGill's experiences of the sixties in detail, to ponder the causes and effects of the troubles, and to examine my own actions and reactions in retrospect, when sufficient time has passed to quiet the emotion which once ran high enough to blunt one's judgment.

It is clear that the passage of ten years is conducive to a more faithful account and interpretation of those events, but it also may have just the opposite result, for in that time one's subconscious mind has had ample opportunity to exercise its magic, to disguise if not eliminate from memory the unfortunate events and one's errors, leaving such examples of favourable outcomes and good judgment as there may have been standing alone — unopposed.

I am aware of this very significant force and, while I cannot begin to claim to have overcome it, I can state that I have done my best to reduce its effect by adhering whenever possible to an account of the events and the occasional ex-

pression of my own feelings as these are recorded in my diary and speeches of that period.

Unrest amongst intellectuals, young and old, has been manifested sporadically and in more or less violent ways for centuries. Nor has the style of expression of their unrest changed perceptibly over the years (though one might concede that some new wrinkles have been introduced in modern times); the baiting of authorities, shocking or generally unacceptable behaviour and obscenity, the excitation of mobs, the occasional frank violence — indeed all the tricks of the trade have been used since time immemorial. It has happened to thousands before, and to read of the antics of the British intellectuals in the 1730's and 1740's which culminated in the resignation of Sir Robert Walpole; of the riots at Winchester, Eton and Rugby schools in 1818, which were only quieted by troops with fixed bayonets; of the student riots at Harvard in 1834, which were said to be, in many ways, comparable to those of 1969, is to realize that in one's own campaign one is simply participating in a continuing (and cyclical) drama of human behaviour. This is comforting; not comforting enough to ease the tension when one's doors are being beaten down, but nice to contemplate between and after the spasms.

Unique features

Though the uprising of the sixties fitted the general pattern, there were some unique features. The first of these was universality. Within a short space of time student uprisings occurred in most of the countries of the world with universities — for example, Britain, France, Italy, Japan, Australia, India, Korea, Nigeria, several Latin American countries, the United States, and Canada. Whereas in the past students everywhere had risen up from time to time, never before, so far as I know, had there been world-wide simultaneous uprisings.

The second outstanding feature of the phenomenon was the careful planning that was carried out. In the past, student rebellion had been characteristically impulsive and unorganized. Those of the sixties were, at least on this continent, relatively carefully planned and executed. The plans, developed in the main and published by the Students for a Democratic Society, commenced with prepared statements dealing with the faults of society, the complicity of the university in these general faults, and the specific shortcomings of the universities, not only in their teaching and research, but in their lack of beneficial influence in society.

The rhetoric having been established, attention was then turned to the actual techniques to be adopted in disturbing the university. The obvious importance of gaining control of the students' government and newspaper was stressed, helpful hints were given as guides to the denigration of the university's administrators and the members of the Board of Governors or Trustees — all

designed to set the stage for the big push which was not to be commenced until all was ready. When the time was ripe, the advance would begin, an issue would be found or invented, and would be exploited by sit-ins, teach-ins, teasing demands, confrontations on every appropriate occasion. A whole scenario was thus worked out by the Students for a Democratic Society, mimeographed, and distributed to all interested parties, of which there were some in nearly every university. It reached McGill in October 1965.

Besides being experts in the art of revolution, the organizers had other vital knowledge; they knew how vulnerable the university was to attack. In those days there must have been very few universities with written rules or codes of ethics; nor were there many with disciplinary bodies that could defend themselves against the ridicule that defence lawyers (a new phenomenon on the university scene) would heap on them.

I know that in our case we had no written rules nor any proper court. Students who misbehaved were brought before a committee of Deans (the Senate Disciplinary Committee) and dealt with in summary fashion. I doubt that there was serious injustice done in that way, but clearly the time had passed when decisions could be made so simply. My predecessor, Cyril James, had sensed that years before. I noted in my diary in February 1965: "A committee of lawyers was appointed (by Dr. James) in October 1962 to advise us on procedure but we have, to date, no result; in fact the lawyers have not met yet." We then, in 1965, established another committee, but it too was slow to move. I noted in September 1967: "I have been pressing for a simple statement that we could present to students that would make our position clear on such major matters as the maintenance of university work . . . of passage-way (or whatever the proper word) and the care of University property, but (Chairman) seems to think it would be unwise, and he is moving his committee slowly." In the event another full year passed before Senate finally adopted a resolution prohibiting disruption or unreasonable interference in the workings of any part of the university. This passage came, as things turned out, just in time.

One final point to make before proceeding with the account of the actual events has to do with what might be described as our special case, derived from our position in Quebec. While not related to the causes of the student uprisings, the attacks from the outside on the university (both verbal and physical) added to the tensions created by the troubles within. Let me mention a few: Michel Brunet's acid criticisms in the press;¹ our running battles with the provincial Government over the grants; the bombs — we had three actual separate bombs on the campus and many more threats; the occupation of the Data Centre by a group of young francophones who were protesting a language bill that was then before the Legislature in Quebec; and the McGill Français march.

The strong feelings that these and many other similar threats evoked undoubtedly had an effect on people's behaviour and confidence; they entered

one's mind at the moment of every important decision. My diary note on 2nd February, 1969, illustrates the point: "I spend the entire day fussing about the case (whether or not to charge a member of the staff for disrupting university activities) and wondering what to do. I spoke to several people . . . not much help anywhere . . . those I spoke to today are seriously worried about the Quebec situation which, they feel, is deteriorating rapidly. If we start a row it will almost certainly, they think, end up in a nationalist feud of some kind with demands for us to 'nationalize', become French, etc. . . ."

On the first day in office, 1962 . . .

Let me now move on to describe our student uprisings, starting with the relatively halcyon days in the early sixties and ending with the upheavals later on in that decade.

The knowledge that student discontent was something to be reckoned with came to me early. On my first day in office I received an ultimatum from the students living in the newly-built residences. It appeared that the construction was faulty, the walls between the bedrooms did not bar the passage of sound; you could hear every whisper next door — you could (one student claimed) even hear your neighbour change his mind. It was impossible to study; the situation was intolerable; something must be done. Because I was new I would be given a few days to correct the fault. If I did not respond appropriately there would be a public demonstration that would continue until the walls were fixed. As it turned out the complaint was perfectly valid and the solution to the problem was easily found; the long and expensive job of sound proofing the walls was commenced at once and all was serene — for a time. But my faith in human nature was tested when, not long after this, I received another complaint from the same source. The men working on the walls were making such a noise that it was impossible to study; the situation was intolerable; something must be done . . .

There was nothing particularly ominous about the situation and it was some time before we were severely tested. But we were soon to know that there was trouble ahead because to the south of us a wave was developing that was bound to engulf us. In May 1963, in recording a meeting of the American Association of Universities, my diary note reads: "The President (of the Association) fears that there is some well organized and highly disturbing central activity among students." I have no doubt that he was referring to the S.D.S. in its formative period.

A year later at the A.A.U. meeting (28th April, 1964) McGeorge Bundy, advisor to President Johnson, told us that they were expecting student riots in the summer over the civil rights issue, and I noted: ". . . in fact difficulties have already cropped up and most of the university people here at the meeting are

seriously concerned." In the autumn of 1964 the University of California became the first victim of the movement, and in April of 1965 after the A.A.U. meeting I wrote: "In practically every University there has been some type of revolt, students marching, having sit-ins, teach-ins, . . . and generally speaking slipping out of control. It was strange to hear the presidents of Harvard, Columbia, California, etc., all describing their own brand of revolution and awful to realize that we all expect more of it in the future."

Our first overt sign of trouble had come just before this as a reaction to the decision to raise student fees in March 1965. The President of the Students' Society, one of whose main declared objectives was to gain "Free University Education For All," was aggressive enough; and she and her cohorts, after some warming-up exercises in front of the U.S. Consulate to protest the Selma affair, decided to organize a "Day of Protest." The first and main event of this was to be a mass meeting on the campus at noon, to be addressed by a prominent member of the Liberal Cabinet who, they felt confident, would rouse the students to a fever pitch that would lead them surely to victory.

As it turned out, luck was on our side. The day was bitterly cold and the speaker, none other than René Lévesque, was characteristically late ("40 minutes late" my happy note reads) and by the time he arrived the few of the original large crowd who remained to hear him were too cold to be aroused by anything. I must express my gratitude to Mr. Levesque for being late — as Dickens once wrote ". . . it's a ill wind as blows no good to nobody. . ."

With enthusiasm thus dimmed, the other items on the program (a mass meeting at the Place Ville Marie, a sit-in in the floor of the corridor outside the room where the Governors were meeting, and the presentation of a petition) failed in their objective; indeed the students, to my surprise, eagerly accepted the suggestion that a committee be struck to discuss the matter of the fee increase, and gradually the issue died of inanition.

But we had little reason to hope that we could long stave off the flood. I suspect that it was at about this time that the S.D.S. Manifesto to which I referred earlier reached our students and gradually we saw the results.

The wave mounts, 1965

Activists gained entry to the Students' Society and the Daily. They started to take an unusual interest in university government and to run the students' affairs with ominous severity. I wrote: "Many people, myself included, are deeply concerned with the manner in which the students' society is managing its affairs this year. There is a very tough group in charge." At a meeting of Deans, ". . . we discussed the action that might be taken to counteract the growing communist-like activities of the Students' Council." We were impressed, for ex-

ample, by the way the Council dealt with the question of joining forces with the other students of Quebec in U.G.E.Q.² When a referendum at McGill failed to produce the desired result in favour of the union, the Council decided to invalidate it. But, my note goes on, "the Council's well within the law in its actions (so far as we can tell) and if we were to make any move, or bring any influence to bear, we should be accused of impeding justice, of suppressing speech and jeopardizing the liberty of students. Sooner or later I may have to step in, but the judgment of the deans is that now is not the time."

If we were undecided about what *direct* step we might take to avert or blunt outright hostilities, we had undertaken as early as 1963 a number of projects to shore up our position. Nothing is to be gained here by describing these in detail, for clearly they were ineffective in defusing the students' ardour, but they are worth mentioning because some of them may have had good effect in the long run and all of them involved much thought and effort on the part of the University's staff. The concentration, of course, was on improving the lot of the individual student. I have been quite impressed by reviewing the steps that we took in trying to welcome the student to the University, in providing counselling and tutoring, in attempting to improve the teaching, the library facilities and, incidentally, in bringing the student more and more into what has been euphemistically described as the "decision-making process." These were sincere efforts, all commenced before we realized that a rebellion was on the way, though it must be admitted that all were hastened, and some were modified to a degree, by the rebellion itself which slowly developed before our eyes.

I was surprised in reviewing my notes to realize how slow the development was. For us, the rest of 1965 was quiet enough (but I noted my sympathy for M. Roche, Rector of the University of Paris, who had to leave a Convocation hurriedly to return to deal with a strike launched by his 110,000 students).

1966, too, was unexpectedly peaceful at McGill. I wrote in March: "I must say that in spite of the very poor types that we had in control of the students this year, things have not been too bad and, so far at least, we have got along without any riots or mass demonstrations, which is a better showing than I had dared hoped for." So lulled was I by this uneasy peace that I was seduced to write in August 1966 the following note, which in the light of subsequent events is unfortunate: "We have survived a difficult period of student unrest and we hope to be improving the lot of students in such a way that unrest will not be a serious factor in the future." I, of course, wish that I had not written that note, for it destroys the image of brilliant prescience that I would have wished to create.

But the year 1966 did pass peacefully, and the only anti-riot energy that we expended was to work out a set of plans for action in the event of disruption of one kind or another.

The wave crests, 1967

Early in 1967 the students began to display openly their ambitions and the powers that they had been forging. Their representatives at the meeting of the Committee on University Government were now thoroughly schooled; they knew precisely what they wanted and they presented their case cleverly and defiantly. In September 1967 any complaisance *vis-à-vis* the students that I might have been enjoying was evidently shattered, for I note on the 25th of September, just after the beginning of the school year: "Today the *Daily* came out with the full student blast. Their views on University government — a mass attack with all other student bodies. We'll have a jolly year for sure."

Now the pace of student action accelerated. Each edition of the *Daily* heaped new insults on the Governors, the administration, and certain members of the staff judged to be the most useful and sensitive targets. Nor did it confine its attention to the University. Anyone with authority in any field was subject to attack; even foreign governments were not immune; the U.S. administration, in particular, was assailed as mercilessly as if it were responsible to the McGill students. Then there were some storm-brewing ructions in the Students' Society itself. My note reads ". . . the two students . . . who have been (literally) rousing the rabble have resigned from the Students' Council. Apparently they felt that they were not being supported by Council members. I don't know whether to feel relieved or not. I can't believe that they won't bob up in some other guise."

Sure enough, they did. I can never be certain of their tactics, but I strongly suspect that they and their colleagues had decided that this was the moment to strike and, lacking a natural issue, they proceeded to create one by needling me through the medium of the *Daily* in the quite correct belief that sooner or later I would react or preferably overact — and thereby provide them with something on which they could build.

Despite fairly numerous complaints in September and October from students, staff, graduates, parents and others, about the defamatory and distasteful articles — to put it mildly — that appeared with monotonous regularity in the *Daily*, I held my hand, evidently fearing a trap. But the fateful article that appeared on 3rd November, 1967, simply could not, so far as I was concerned, be ignored. True enough, the filth that it contained could have been matched by what could be found in bookstores a few hundred yards away and in any news-stand these days — but this had something loathsome and malignant in it that I felt should be challenged in spite of the charges of prudish censorship that would certainly result. Even some of the students were horrified: they called the Police Morality Squad (I've never known who actually called or what they had in mind) and early in the morning they gathered up and destroyed all the copies of the *Daily* they could find. But already a large number had been distributed for all to read who wanted to — and nearly everybody did.

The *Daily* affair

Before the day was out we had received a complaint from the U.S. Consulate and howls of protest from dozens of shocked and angry people both inside and outside the University. My diary for the 3rd of November, 1967, reads: "I have to spend the rest of the day trying to collect facts and planning for some action. The paper has been steadily deteriorating in every respect and today's article is the last straw. We'll have to take action." And for the next day: "Unless my guess is very wrong I shall have much to say (in my diary) about the 'affaire Daily' because I strongly suspect that the activist students will regard this as the ideal situation on which to mass their 'student power' movement and I have no doubt that with the start of our official proceedings we'll see plenty of mass action, obstructions, screams of shame, suppression of freedom, discrimination, and the like. Doubtless the strength of our characters will be pretty severely tested. This morning I met with a group of advisors and we . . ." I went on to describe how we drew up the charges against the offending students, presented them, and so on. Then began a long-drawn-out and harrowing experience, explosive for a few days and grumbling for months. Time does not permit any detailed accounting of the events, they were so numerous and some of them so complicated. Let me simply describe briefly some of the more important of them, and later try to assess their significance.

The immediate reactions to the article and to my charging the journalists were, as I have said, explosive. There was a swell of opposition to one or the other on the part of students, staff, graduates, and the public at large. The activist students and some of the staff members held that there was, in the first place, nothing wrong with the article — to censor it was ridiculous — it was just plain satire and borrowed, at that. Even if there were something wrong with it I had no right to interfere, they said; any disciplining called for should have been left to the students themselves.

These students, ably abetted by a few of the teaching staff, vented their spleen first by enlisting the support of other student bodies in other universities across the country; and, thus fortified, by calling mass meetings of protest, issuing vituperative pamphlets and articles in the *Daily*, and finally marching on the Administration Building with the avowed purpose of breaking up the Disciplinary Committee's first hearing and of persuading me to withdraw the charges. They prevented the hearings from taking place by crowding the room, and they then remained in the corridors of the building — not, theoretically at least, interfering with business.

For two days the occupation was peaceful, and as students singly and in pairs started to abandon their vigil I began to think that all would become bored and would follow suit. But that would have spelt disgrace for them. Something must be done to rekindle interest. The obvious thing to do was to break down

the doors and enter my office, and this they proceeded to do on the evening of the second day. When I appeared on the scene I was greeted by some sixty students amiably draped about the furniture and the floor, most of them grinning, but all of them apparently determined to stay until the charges were withdrawn.

There followed a series of events which seemed desperately serious at the time, but appear ludicrous ten years later. In staccato form this sequence was —

1. The issuing of previously prepared statements to each student advising that disciplinary action would be taken if the order to leave were not obeyed forthwith.

2. Anguished consultations between the students. To stay or not to stay? Eventual answer: yes — till the end. There was a lot of melodrama in the air.

3. The arrival of the police. Doubts about their authority on the campus (private property). The decision on this point being made of the City Solicitor, whose dinner at Ste. Rose was rudely interrupted by this extra-ordinary duty.

4. The laborious removal of the students from the office. It required two burly policemen to carry each student to the elevator, to supervise the descent, and to resume the lugging to deposit the body on the ground outside. Until the last moment the students, following directions, were completely limp — and thus hard to carry. As the outside door was reached, each student would start to writhe and scream, obviously hoping that the television crew outside would record their efforts as evidence of police brutality.

And so it went until 5 a.m. the next day, by which time the building was cleared — not to be forcibly entered again for over a year.

Aftermath

No one was hurt (there was not the slightest sign of police brutality), but no one was satisfied. There were subsequent mass meetings and a few attempts to interfere physically with the meetings of the Disciplinary Committee, but, for the time being, there was a lull in the overt warfare induced in part by the rather surprising (to me) result of a referendum conducted by the Students' Council. More than half the eligible students voted, and of those more than half did not feel that the charges should be withdrawn, and three-quarters said they would not strike if the charges were not withdrawn.

While the trials of the journalists and the "sit-ins" continued there was sustained but relatively subdued excitement; and eventually, when the announcements of the verdicts — which took place over a protracted period —

were completed, all the furor subsided to the level of discussion, albeit heated enough, about the justness of the penalties imposed. As might have been anticipated, there was on this point a wide difference of opinion. Some felt that complete exoneration was the only tenable result, others that much more severe sentences were called for across the board. Indeed, I suspect (judging from the tone of their letters) that there were those who would not have been satisfied with anything short of the guillotine for all concerned, myself included.

I do not say this wholly facetiously. One of the outstanding features of this episode was the depth of feelings that were aroused. Different people were aroused by different things; some by the article itself; some by the administration's interference in the so-called proper affairs of the students; and conversely still others by the fact that the administration had not, at the outset, stamped out the whole rotten element that was causing all the trouble.

I used sometimes, perhaps mischievously, to sort out the flood of letters that I received each day during the crisis. I formed three piles on my desk. In one I put those letters in which the writer expressed support for and appreciation of the way things were being handled. On the second pile I placed letters highly critical of me for being so stupidly harsh, for presuming to censor writings, for interfering with students. In the third pile were letters criticizing me, often bitterly, for being so weak, for not expelling the students forthwith. (The most emphatic of these was really not a letter; it was just an envelope enclosing a white feather. The relieving feature was that the sender obviously lacked courage too, for he or she did not risk revealing his or her identity.) There those piles stood at the end of the day on my desk. The first (congratulatory) pile was always pitifully small, but the other two reached high towards the ceiling and, strangely enough, they were almost invariably the same height. Clearly, as many people thought me wrong for *taking* as for *not taking enough* action. This was small comfort, indeed, but it was a time when comfort was in short supply.

Effects on university government

In the remainder of the year following the upsurge of activity surrounding the *Daily* affair there were no acts of violence. This is not to say that all was quiet. There was intense action on the legal and political fronts, the former involving the Disciplinary Committee, which besides its own very considerable difficulties had its authority challenged, unsuccessfully, in the courts. The latter, the political front concerning the role of the university and the composition of its governing bodies, was of more lasting importance.

University government had been the focus of debate for years. By 1960 the teaching staff had gradually — and, be it noted, by virtue of reasoned agreement — achieved a significant position in the power structure. But the process was not to end here. In 1965, following the report of the Duff-Berdahl commis-

sion, the debates resumed, and two years later, actually during the heat of the *Daily* affair, a report of a Joint Committee of Senate and Board of Governors recommended extensive changes. These, in turn, were hotly debated in the university community, and some modifications were introduced and eventually adopted. In briefest terms the results were these: Senate representatives were to sit on the Board of Governors; and the teaching staff by being a majority were to control a Senate on which the students were to be represented.

To express the changes in this way is, of course, to understate their importance and to evade, of necessity, a description of the seemingly endless manoeuvring, posturing, and frank squabbles that characterized the process. We started the academic year 1968-69 under this new and not entirely happy management; our course could hardly be described as untroubled. As I noted in the annual report, "In Senate the students displayed remarkable ability in debate, ingenuity in procedure, and an ill-defined purpose which seemed sometimes to be rather the destruction of the credibility and the reputation of Senate than its advancement as an effective academic governing body. The staff members of Senate seemed somewhat bewildered by the tactics of the well-drilled and disciplined 'slate' that formed the bulk of the student representation, and in the early months of this Senate's life their arguments were less well prepared and much less forcefully presented than the students'.

"But with the passage of time the romance of political gamesmanship wore thin, and towards the end of the year Senate resumed its accustomed role of quiet debate and thoughtful decision upon the academic business of the University, which business, strange to relate, it completed before the year's end."³

A second wave

Against this backdrop of peaceful argument there appeared at frequent intervals during 1968-69 actions of a more or less violent nature to dramatize the whole. These actions could be (incompletely) separated into two new categories; those arising from within the university, and those from outside. To deal with the latter first; we had the occupation of the Data Centre mentioned earlier, and then three months later a much more ominous attack — the McGill Français demonstration of the 28th of March, 1969, which was designed to persuade McGill to change its English ways. These were disturbing experiences, but the troubles within are of more immediate importance to us here. These all involved disruption of the university's work. The first two, which occurred in November 1968, were relatively innocent. The students in Political Science went on strike and occupied part of their department's quarters, where they maintained a continuous debate about departmental politics, a subject very much in line with their academic field. On the second occasion some students broke into a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Science to demand representation in the meeting. After some fairly quiet debate the meeting was terminated.

In short order at the end of January and early February there were three disruptions of a more serious nature. Meetings of the Senate Nominating Committee, the Board of Governors, and of Senate itself were broken up by groups of students, led the first two times by a certain member of the teaching staff. In these first two, force was clearly displayed. It had, of course, been displayed in the *Daily* crisis, but we had hoped that when that had settled and when new avenues had been opened for students and staff we had seen the end of it. But here it was again — romping, ridiculous force with a strong element of Madison Avenue; ridiculous, perhaps, but menacing. I said to Senate that “a group of individuals within our community who are deeply and earnestly committed to certain lines of thought and action are attempting to influence the actions of the community as a whole. Their right to do this through normal and peaceful channels of actions is undisputed . . . but the point of view of any one group . . . must not be imposed by force and it is force that is now being used — it will, if unchecked, eventually influence every opinion on this campus.”

There was little doubt this time as to what should be done. The ringleader must be charged. But even now there were those who felt it would be unwise — the March 28th demonstration about which we had been fully warned was not far off and our staff member was playing a part in that too. Besides, the Sir George Williams' campus was in agony just at that moment.⁴ Would it not, some cautioned, be dangerous to start another round of legal hassling? Wouldn't the charge simply cause an inflammable situation to burst into flame? But the obvious risks were, in my view, clearly outweighed by the need to act. A charge was laid, and the difficulties in setting up an appropriate court to hear the case were overcome. The case was heard, and in due course this staff member was dismissed from the university.

As it turned out, any qualms that we had entertained of violent reactions to the charging, the trial, and the verdict dissipated as time passed. The excitement that had been so effervescent in the early days of the uprising gradually simmered down as boredom took over, and boredom was certainly a major factor in the diminishing of agitation everywhere. The first parade or sit-in, the early vitriol in the papers, and the outraging of authority had all been exciting. The second time around the glamour diminished perceptibly, the rhetoric began to pall, and the masses upon whose involvement success depends turned to other pursuits, leaving the leaders dancing alone.

My notes for the remainder of 1969 and 1970 reveal only a few sporadic outbursts, none of them sustained. Some examples: some of our students attempted to block the roads to the U.S. border to protest the atom bomb test in the Aleutians; the campus was vandalized during the police and firemen's strike; students protested the cutting down of trees to make way for a new building on the campus by sitting on the ground, and marched in the streets to protest a city ordinance prohibiting marching! Twice during this period bombs (set by out-

siders, presumably) exploded on the campus, but no one was hurt. Two students attacked and injured the President of the Students' Society. They were tried by our new-style Senate Disciplinary Committee and dismissed from the university. Even taken together, these events are not impressive when compared to the upheavals which preceded them, and one can conclude that the real battle ended early in the year 1969.

Reflections, 1978

To attempt to identify clearly the cause of those troubles is to assume an apparently impossible task, one that is well beyond me and indeed appears to have eluded the grasp of those psychologists, psychiatrists and historians whose writings I have consulted. No sooner does one come across an explanation that seems to satisfy than one discovers that there is something behind it — one finds oneself in the position of the Eastern prophet who taught that the world rests on the back of an elephant which, in turn, stands on the back of another elephant. Asked what *that* elephant stands on, the prophet said: "Oh, there are elephants all the way down."

In searching the depths for a basic cause one finds Toynbee's analysis as appealing as any. He identifies the invention of the hoe as the starting point of it all. "Once a human being has regimented himself to becoming a ploughman or shepherd, it is relatively easy for him to enslave himself to the conveyor belt and the drawing board and the computer. He can do it, but he cannot rid himself of repining, and the ultra regimentation that is the price of hyper-sophisticated technology is almost intolerably repugnant to him . . . We can understand the furious revolt of the rising generation that's being asked to put its neck under a heavier and tighter yoke than any of its predecessors have worn."⁵

If regimentation is the primary source of unrest, it is supplemented by the direction in which the world is being led by technological advance. As one writer puts it dramatically: "It is their lack of future, their sense of being caught up in some massive technological-industrial machine that has somehow managed to grind up everything of value from the past and spew it forth as highways and automobiles and T.V. sets, and which gave promise shortly of grinding up the future as well and spewing it forth as a radioactive cinder of a planet."⁶

If one accepts these premises, even as I have grossly over-simplified them, the next step in the process follows readily. The thus basically-disturbed rising generation, with still an undiluted hope for reform, casts about for fields to conquer, and here it encounters no difficulty for faults are legion: inequalities, greed, dishonesty, unfairness — the products of the whole gamut of human frailties engulf the world. To protest these is natural, and there is always a simmer of protest in each country. That this simmer should suddenly come to a boil within a short space of time throughout the world is harder to explain. So different

were the conditions in the various countries that no common precipitating cause can be identified.

There was, however, a common factor, if not a cause, and that was communication. Whereas in the past the news of a student uprising would be slow in reaching other countries and probably undramatically described there, with the advent of instant world-wide communication lines the news spread like wildfire and was highly embellished by photography. Only the most conservative, and suppressed, youth groups could fail to be caught up in the stream of excitement. The potential radicals were bound to be stirred into action; they could hardly fail to embrace some at least of the objectives of the new left, or its counterparts, which were so boldly and so zealously proclaimed.

To all of them it seemed that the time was ripe to right the world, and the university was an obvious first battleground. If the universities could be controlled and if they were to exert their power to attack the ills of the world, a great leap forward would be made. Other institutions which did not automatically fall into line would be tackled later.

The strategy clearly was to disrupt the University in the hope that, when the smoke cleared, control would be in the hands of those who would use it as a political instrument. In our case the evidence for this emerged in our discussions on university government at all levels, but was particularly prominent in Senate, where the student representation, partly in earnest, but with their tongues in their cheeks, introduced motions which, if passed, would have led the University down a most hazardous and destructive pathway. One of the few occasions on which I left the chair to speak on a motion before Senate was to urge that it reject just such a motion.

Consequences

If I had no sympathy at all for the strategy, nor for most of the tactics, there was one element in the student program which I did support — the plea for better teaching. Some of the complaints were justified, I was convinced, and we did all that we could to meet them — but it was a difficult task. Students, while expert at listing their grievances, had few sensible suggestions to make as to how things might be improved, and the teaching staff found it difficult to go far beyond toning up their traditional techniques. Such brave experiments as were undertaken seemed to wither on the vine.

I do not know what the long term results have been, but I suspect that there have been few. However difficult they were to deal with, these complaints about the teaching, were, I felt, the only valid ones involving McGill. In my view there was no trace of substance in the trumped up charges of corruption on the part of members of the Board of Governors; of our being slaves of the military-

industrial complex; of the carrying out of research for war-like purposes; or of the suppression of liberties. These assertions and other abuse that was heaped upon us were, for the most part, probes searching for soft spots, on the off-chance that something interesting would turn up. In general, students in Canada could only echo the cries of their colleagues in the United States. We were not at war; there was no draft; and those in Canada whose civil rights were less than full did not seem to want the students' help in pleading their cause. Indeed when a group of Canadian students decided to make the Canadian Indian issue part of their official program, they were told to mind their own problems and to stop patronizing.

Thus, apart from the educational issue, our students had few if any clear-cut special grievances to pursue; they had to follow the well-worn tracks laid by others. To say this is most certainly not to sneer. They, with all other members of their generation, felt a deep and genuine concern, and I have full respect for the real reformers amongst the activists even if I had occasion to deplore their tactics from time to time. I had no respect for the anarchists or the revolutionaries for revolution's sake, of whom we had our share. Clearly they had no intention to reform, their only objective was to disrupt and, in the process, they damaged seriously their professed cause. One wonders, however, how much harm or good was achieved by all this activity. On the positive side one can observe that they made everyone sit up and take notice: governments, businesses, universities and schools, religious groups, and parents, all looked at themselves with a penetrating gaze and wondered. Doubtless some useful reforms resulted from this. The activists could claim to be if not the forerunners, at least the promoters, of consumerism, of anti-pollution movements, and the like; none of them unmixed blessings, but all of them honest attempts to slow the headlong rush of the technological-industrial machine.

On the negative side one cannot overlook the immediate effects of the disruptions on the University. On the surface there appeared to be little disturbance of the ordinary and proper activities: very few lectures were cancelled; the library stayed open and many of the student and staff activities carried on as usual. But beneath the surface there were some serious effects: animosities; endless arguments that absorbed time that could have been better spent getting on with the job; a loss of respect for the University by the public at large; a general sweeping away of confidence. The impact of these cannot be measured and I do not know how long the ill effects lasted. I thought that during the last year before my retirement — during which all was comparatively quiet — the wounds were healing rapidly, and although I have not been in close touch, I gather that they are now virtually healed; only the scars remain. These may or may not be harmful; I'm in no position to judge.

It is quite possible that my fears — that the degree of democratization that we had reached, partly as a result of the uprising, would have a stifling effect on

truly scholarly activities, and that the public would never regain its respect for universities — will have proved wrong. I think it possible, because I know how resilient a university is.

NOTES

This paper is a version of a talk given by Dr. Robertson to the James McGill Society on 10th October, 1978.

1. In November 1963 and January 1964, Professor Brunet wrote letters to the Press protesting McGill's establishment of the French Canada Studies Program and what he conceived to be the Quebec Government's overgenerous treatment of "scandalously rich" McGill. These letters both caused a considerable stir and were the subject of many editorials in both the English and the French press.
2. The Union Général des Étudiants de Québec was a forerunner of the present Association National des Étudiants de Québec.
3. Annual Report, 1968-69, McGill University (Montreal: McGill Publications Service), p. 7 et seq.
4. In late January of 1969, a group of black students took over the Sir George Williams computer centre in protest against racism, with which they charged a biology professor at the University. As the situation escalated, they were joined by Maoists, Separatists, and Anarchists. On February 11, 1969, on the thirteenth day of occupation, they were finally evicted by the police. Every piece of equipment in the centre was broken, and the damage was completed by a fire which erupted when the riot squad police moved in. Seventy-nine people were arrested.
5. Arnold Toynbee, "Young Elites Revolt," *London Observer*, 1968; reprinted in *The Montreal Star*, January 13, 1968.
6. McReynolds, *Saturday Night*, September 1965.

Résumé

Le malaise étudiant des années soixante était-il la manifestation d'une crise politique frappant toutes les sociétés occidentales ou était-ce au contraire le signe d'un affaiblissement général des universités? Y avait-il quelque chose qui n'allait pas à McGill, et si oui, y a-t-on remédié? Comme l'histoire le montre et le remontre, les effets ont souvent peu de rapports avec les causes; la paix d'aujourd'hui ne signifie nullement que les conflits d'hier ont été réglés. Rocke Robertson parle d'un point de vue tout à fait personnel de ce qu'il a vécu et pensé en tant que principal de l'université durant cette période étonnamment longue au cours de laquelle cette vague, comme il se plaît à l'appeler, a déferlé et redéferlé sur nos rivages au grand dam de leurs habitants. Il juge que ce mouvement a eu des effets salutaires, quoique temporaires, sur les établissements visés et qu'une bonne part du mécontentement ainsi manifesté n'avait aucune raison d'être et n'a été qu'un grand gaspillage d'énergies et d'émotions. Il concède un grief de taille aux étudiants, la mauvaise qualité de l'enseignement qui leur était dispensé.