The Scholar's Way

Stanley Brice Frost.
McGILL UNIVERSITY: FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING.
Volume 1: 1801-1895.
Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980.
313 pp. $25.00.

Arthur G. Powell.
THE UNCERTAIN PROFESSION:
HARVARD AND THE SEARCH FOR EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY.
Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980.
341 pp. $18.50.

"Parents are the last people," exclaimed the testy housemaster in the English public school, "who should have children." He had had a long day putting up with a number of them; but the blow was typical of many struck on the age-old battlefield of education between the scholars and the mothers. A child can hardly become what we think of as a complete adult without much cool instruction in the uses of reason and self-denial. On the other hand, without security in the warmth of an unthinking affection, the same child can hardly remain what we like to feel is human.

As cure-alls for the ills of education, mindless love and loveless mind are equally delusory treatments. The truly difficult path for the educator lies in reconciling the apparently irreconcilable, practising the calculations of scholarship in a context of uncalculated affection, offering both succour and judgment.

It is tempting for a writer to indulge thus in the rhetoric of antithesis, playing in the abstract with the logic of the conflicts that bedevil practice. The hopes of families, the plans of teachers, whole personal careers in education, and entire histories of enduring institutions suffer under such conflicts. But antithesis is merely a literary device. It may dramatize for us an illusion of order when we most need that illusion, so that we may persist in trying to come to terms with

seeming chaos. But the universe is not necessarily amenable to comprehension by the split-halves of the human brain.

We have been reading two books that strongly tempt an antithetical treatment. In each the undertaking implies a delivery of answers, historically arrived at, to the problems of education in universities. The universities in question, Harvard and McGill, aspire to comparable status in each of their adjacent nations; but at this point the parallels begin to peter out. Stanley Frost's first volume of the official history of McGill as a whole carries us up to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Arthur Powell's story of the role of the Graduate School of Education within Harvard begins more or less in that decade and brings us up to the 60's; yet it has great interest both for McGill and for its Faculty of Education.

In Frost's book the sense of an educational purpose is not strong. The themes are of emergence, survival, and growth to some maturity, of what was in its first decades an extraordinarily amateurish, forlorn, and fragile institution. There was no question of inventing a purpose or fulfilling a mission; the problem was simply to find ways of getting its upkeep paid for. Learning was a commodity manufactured elsewhere, and the local franchise hardly questioned the quality of its goods while it struggled to maintain supply and build up a clientele. It is true that the clientele's idea of its needs did begin to shape the university's offerings once it had acquired an active and diligent Board of Governors, and that under Principal Dawson those needs received an emphasis that led directly to the university's present reputation, based on achievements in the applied and theoretical sciences. But although the convictions and predilections of wealthy donors played their usual part in establishing chairs and building laboratories, and thus in determining the directions taken by the university's growth, one would like to believe that that part was not as dominant as it often appears to have been.

The impression achieved by Frost's invariably smooth marshalling of a bewildering array of facts is similar to that received when one contemplates the inner circle of those running the university today. The subjects of discussion are all undeniably of importance, and their treatment is unexceptionably high-minded and urbane; but they are almost exclusively administrative in character. Educational considerations as such are rare. For many years the annual meeting of the Principal with the entire academic staff, in which he reports on the state of the university, has been hardly distinguishable from the annual meeting of the President of a large corporation with its shareholders. The past, present, and future of its financial state, and of its relations with government, constitute one major topic. Relations with its employees constitute another. Productivity is measured in numbers of students, which are reported with meticulous care. Questions about quality control of the product, however, are rarely gone into in any detail.

Stanley Frost tells a good story, managing with energy and confidence the

appropriately Victorian mode of formal language familiar to those who attend academic ceremonies, such as of course this book really is. The prose of Arthur Powell, equally muscular, carries content of a different sort in a somewhat plainer though still ingenious fabric. Here the matter is policy, the principles and objectives of one party balanced with those of others in contention. Almost each sentence introduces a new element into an already complex context of generalizations, weaves it into the context, and carries the whole forward in judicious balance toward a fresh development. A sense of movement in ideas and events is thus maintained, with a lucidity and control that make for enthralling reading.

"Was a separate and elaborate commitment to education really justifiable in an elite university?" he asks in conclusion. "Problems were rarely solved; they were survived"; but the sheer vitality of the long story he has to tell is part of the answer. From Eliot to Lowell to Conant, Harvard's Presidents display an awareness of the role of their university in influencing the well-being of the nation that is oddly absent, when one thinks of it, from the earlier history of McGill; and the actions that they take in Harvard are a direct consequence of those views. Having embarked on its separate commitment to education, this elite university is seldom agreed upon the role of that commitment for more than five years at a time, but it is never inactive about it, or indifferent. We are led by decades through struggles over purpose and up to resolutions of policy that involve, as active and always independent forces, the responsible professor or Dean, the President of the time, groups of staff in the School, and potential donors — individual or corporate — of funds; active in the background are various national groupings of the teaching profession, the mass of academics in the traditional fields at Harvard, successive rise and fall in demands for training from the mass of schools, tides of economic success or failure sweeping the nation, and the long slow erosions of social change.

As the conditions and the players change through each decade we watch issue after issue unfold that up to half a century later have been or are freshly with us in Canada, still unresolved and seemingly unresolvable. (Thus for example we hear of the bitter lesson learned by the School's faculty in the 20's and 30's — "the path to institutional survival led away from any preoccupation with professional training.") Whereas among us they often crop up as obscure elements in a heaving stew of ill-defined cross-purposes and ad-hoc politicking, in the Harvard context they were articulated with an enviable clearsightedness belonging as much to the protagonists of the time as to their present historian.

In succession, Harvard aimed to restore the status of the secondary schools, initially with a view to recruitment to the college; to raise the standards of the teaching profession in competence; then in judgment and academic knowledge in the traditional fields; then in expertise in such uniquely professional fields as guidance, play, and vocational education; then in research, and finally in prestige and in diversity. On the presumption that there was a role for education in the renewal of the nation, it aimed successively to advance social science, to

restore social mobility, to create a meritocracy, and in the 60's, to reform both urban education and education outwith the schools.

These are the things it *aimed* to do, at different times. In almost none of such programmatic undertakings was any discernible progress recorded. The profession, you might expect, emerges from this story with its uncertainty deepened rather than resolved. Yet at least, as Powell concludes, the explanation for the continuing confusion of purpose is clear; the problems of education are far more complex than university men, no matter how accomplished, have been apt to assume.

(Mothers go on being mothers; the children keep coming. The problems are rarely solved; they are survived.)

Was anything decided? The list is modest but not uninteresting — One does not teach broad understanding and informed judgment through classes. Defining the qualities of educators is fruitless, defining their problems is fruitful. People will not pay to solve educational problems. The creation of an educational elite, through career recruitment and management, is feasible and effective. Academic collaboration with education, except on the part of social sciences, is ineffective. One achieves no linkage between social science and education by the employment of researchers in field projects of application; but having research and practice live side by side (in an Ed.D. program) is a source of strength to both.

There is after all then some merit in the struggle. Contemplating the recent decades in Canada one can only envy the energy and resolve with which issues of policy in education, no matter how intractable, were continually held in sharp focus by the presidents and deans and professors of Harvard, if one may judge from their frequently quoted memoranda in this admirable book. One longs for an end to the prolonged mental hibernation of the north, and to the making of desultory transactions through which we hope for a revelation.

J.K.H.