

Book Reviews

David J. Bercuson, Robert Bothwell,
and J.L. Granatstein.
**THE GREAT BRAIN ROBBERY:
CANADA'S UNIVERSITIES ON THE ROAD TO RUIN.**
Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984.
160 pp. \$12.95.

"Canadians are being robbed." With this startling sentence the authors of **The Great Brain Robbery** begin their self-confessed polemic on the parlous state of undergraduate education in this country. They refer to the billions of dollars (\$8.5 billion per year) which are funnelled from Canadian taxpayers through various levels of government into post-secondary education; and they maintain that, far from getting value for their money, the taxpayers are supporting an education whose quality and value have declined drastically in the last twenty years.

David Bercuson, Robert Bothwell and J.L. Granatstein are all Professors of History at Canadian universities, (Calgary, Toronto and York respectively) and claim thirty-five years of teaching between them. They are committed to higher education, perceive it as essential to the survival of the country, and are angry at the erosion of excellence which they have observed since entering the academic world in the 1970s.

Many of the criticisms expressed by Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein have been worrying the academic community for a number of years. Books like **Academic Strategy**, by George Keller and **Nation at Risk** reflect the same concerns. The Ontario Department of Education established the Bovey Commission to look into several of these same problems in Ontario universities. **The Great Brain Robbery** is, then, both timely and important. It also offers some interesting solutions to the weaknesses it reveals. Unfortunately the impact of the book is marred by its diffuse organization, its repetitiveness and the often facile and unrealistic answers it suggests to complex questions.

The authors lay the blame for the current state of higher education mainly on governments and university administrations.

In a review of government policy toward the funding of universities since the Massey Commission of 1951 they argue that the rapid expansion of the late 1960s and early 1970s was endorsed and supported by government for political reasons but was not wisely or carefully planned. When population trends reversed and economic growth slowed down, government grants, based on numbers of students enrolled, diminished. Universities, unable and unwilling to reduce the size of their faculties, lowered admission standards. Bercuson, Bothwell and Granatstein are of the opinion that many ill-prepared and indeed nearly illiterate students are able to gain admission to university at the present time and they insist that entrance standards must be raised. "There must be an end to the open accessibility that has ruined the universities." They do not however discuss the responsibility of elementary and secondary education in the present situation, the social climate which has allowed it to occur, nor the political, economic and educational implications of returning to a frankly elitist system.

There has been a decline in excellence in teaching, course development, and research due largely, in the authors' view, to the rise of democracy in university administration and the development of faculty unionism. The former has led to the confusion of academic and economic issues and the latter to the protection of the weakest and least able professors. The system of tenure, which was devised to protect academic freedom, has transformed itself into a system of defensive entrenchment. The result is that there is stagnation and often complacency or even laziness amongst faculty and a denial of the right of young, highly-qualified PhDs to compete for university positions.

The aging of teachers at all levels and the lack of access to the profession for younger people is indeed a knotty problem which governments, unions and educational administrators alike have been struggling with for some time. The recently released Bovey Commission report recommends the establishment of a special "renewal-and-adjustment" fund to allow for the appointment of younger faculty over the next five years. Bercuson, Bothwell, and Granatstein show their naiveté in recommending the abolition of tenure, the granting of short-term contracts and open competition for all faculty positions - an idea unlikely to be acceptable to those who have the power to effect change.

The authors find that the courses being offered and the academic standards required are much less demanding than they were twenty years ago and that the result is an erosion of the quality and value of a university education. They bemoan the passing of a core curriculum which required all students to master the basics of a liberal arts education. They characterize the present system as a "supermarket approach" in which students, "in their great wisdom, are given almost total freedom to choose

courses. Few are up to the task of choosing wisely." On the other hand, they also find that honours students are required to specialize too narrowly and too early. The real value of a university degree is also being eroded by the phenomenon of grade-inflation, because of which fewer students fail and more students receive higher marks than they used to. Inter-disciplinary programmes like Canadian Studies are another aspect of the curriculum that is criticized. The authors question their value and describe them as being like a smorgasbord in which students fail to get solid disciplinary training and a "shallow piecemeal effect" is created.

The authors believe it is part of the duty of a university professor to do research and to share it with the academic community through scholarly articles and books. The authors maintain that, because the policy of "publish or perish" has never been enforced in Canada and because of the difficulty and cost of getting scholarly works published, many Canadian professors do not do research and do not publish. The result is that new ideas are not given the opportunity to be tried and tested by peers, and unsound theories or research methods are not discovered and condemned.

In the last chapter of their polemic, the authors make a final statement of their beliefs and assumptions and offer some suggestions for improving the situation. They believe that the quality of education offered in Canadian universities has eroded. They assume that universities are not and should not be for everyone, but that young men and women of high intellectual ability alone should attend them and should receive the best education possible. They believe that it is necessary for the well-being of the country that a high-quality university system be re-established. Their suggestions include new methods of financing to reduce enrollment-based funding; the raising of fees; a generous system of student loans and scholarships to compensate; higher entrance standards; a compulsory core curriculum; a halt to grade-inflation; a replacement of tenure with a system of contracts and peer-review committees; and government support for university presses.

The issues raised in this book are of vital importance not only to the university community, but also to every thinking and concerned citizen. Most of them have been raised before and will be again; none of them is easily solved. It is the authors' passion and commitment to the issues that makes this a valuable book, rather than their originality or illuminating insights.

REFERENCES

Eve Marshall
The Study

- Bovey, Edmund. (1985). **Report on the Future of Universities in Ontario**. Toronto: Queen's Park Press.
- Keller, George. (1983). **Academic Strategy: The management revolution in American higher education**. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). **A Nation at Risk: The imperative for educational reform**. Washington, D.C.