

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JOHN T. SAYWELL, *Someone to Teach Them: York University and the Great University Explosion, 1960-1973*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, xii + 296 p., index.

The cover of this publication is a perfect symbol for Saywell's overall theme. Sitting behind a simple desk, equipped with only a telephone, is Murray Ross, York University's first President. Looking up at a boom camera, Ross is situated in the middle of a vast farmer's field which is lightly dusted with snow. Anyone familiar with the early days of York knows that such a bleak, Spartan wasteland characterized the look and tone of the Downsview campus.

John Saywell was Dean of Arts at York University during the turbulent decade 1963-1973. This book is a memoir and historical sketch devoted to those years. As memoir, it entertains with personal insights from someone intimate with the precise details of institutional events. As historical sketch, it demonstrates the affiliative, cognitive, and egocentric constraints articulated by psychologist Irving Janis. However, Saywell's account is well worth reading in that he touches upon themes that are central and critical to our understanding of Canadian universities.

York University began as an offspring of the University of Toronto in the 1960s. Saywell spells out the nature of this relationship while placing it in the context of Murray Ross's ambitious vision of what York might be in the future. Initially, it was proposed that York would simply be a satellite of the august University of Toronto. York's *modus vivendi* would be to "absorb" surplus students from the downtown Toronto campus. This rather bland picture for York College (as it was originally designated) did not at all match Ross's larger dream of a Canadian Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard or Yale in the suburbs; an institution devoted to the best of liberal education. Sadly, this dream germinated in the minds of a group of Toronto businessmen seeking to construct a university that would offer a "practical" alternative to the education provided by the University of Toronto. Herein lay the sour seed of what would become profoundly problematic for the genesis and evolution of York University.

From Saywell's presentation we learn that York was to be formally affiliated with the University of Toronto for at least its first four years. York would only offer courses within Toronto's three-year general course curriculum, as well as observing "equivalent" standards of entrance and

evaluation. Of particular significance for the founding principles of this university, all faculty appointments would have to be approved by the appropriate University of Toronto department. Murray Ross, as the university's founding President, envisioned something more grandiose and autonomous. Saywell quickly offers several personal insights that serve to dismantle any view of Ross as a truly visionary academic leader. Ross is presented as an affable pragmatist who tended to promise more than he could possibly deliver and who demanded a degree of unquestioning loyalty from others that was unreasonable and inappropriate in an academic milieu.

One particular case in point, not even alluded to in Saywell's treatment, speaks precisely to the fundamental flaw at the core of York University's founding. In November 1959, Ross offered George Parkin Grant a position in the school's philosophy department. Grant, probably Canada's foremost teacher of philosophy, received a formal letter of appointment in January 1960. Grant was terribly excited about the prospect of returning to Toronto from Halifax. As founding chair of the philosophy department, Grant would be in his element. However, he soon received instructions from York's registrar that he would be teaching the first year philosophy course exactly as laid out in the University of Toronto calendar, including using the textbook and examinations attached to that offering. Grant was both stunned and furious to learn that his department would be under the tutelage of the Toronto philosophy department for four years. To make matters far worse, Grant discovered that he was proscribed from teaching Plato's Republic and was compelled to use as his textbook, *The Spirit of Philosophy*, by Marcus Long. Grant had the highest respect (even reverence) for Plato's work and very little regard for Long's treatment of the philosophical project. With such a humiliating prospect before him, Grant felt compelled to submit his letter of resignation to Ross in April 1960. One can only lament what the future of York University's philosophy department might have been if someone of Grant's stature, wisdom and substance was given scope to actually do philosophy within that setting.

Saywell is thorough in providing details and insights into the gradual development of York as a viable post-secondary institution. Certainly the practical challenges of building a teaching facility and faculty in the less than hospitable surroundings of Keele and Steeles were enormous. And, of course, universities are in some sense a "business" requiring powerful allies drawn from government and corporate worlds to make them happen. Tensions between the academic elements of the new university and the administrative ones were inevitable and ineluctable. Saywell himself demonstrates a gradual transformation from the "pure" academic he was when starting in the history department at the University of Toronto to the Dean of Arts he became at York. The rather Machiavellian approach taken by Murray Ross to luring someone like George Grant to the new university is revealingly symptomatic of a style of university management and administration that is prevalent, if not pervasive, in postmodern Canadian settings. Powerful interests are served by our universities (or "multiversities" to use Grant's coinage) and these interests are not always

informed with a deep devotion to what is truly comprehended by a “liberal” education.

Saywell’s tenure as Dean of Arts at York covers a period that was indeed pivotal. He worked hard to attract academic talent to a fledgling university at a time when there were few home-grown academics. Graduate level education in Canada in the 1960s was exceedingly thin and, of necessity, university recruiters had to seek American, British and other foreign candidates to populate their faculties. Saywell offers some useful statistics on this front and discusses it as a preamble to the emerging crisis around the “Americanization” of Canadian university faculties.

For the sociologist reader, Saywell offers some interesting perspectives. An important part of his brief as Dean of Arts was the recruitment of a suitable occupant for the chair in that discipline. Saywell notes that Canadian sociology in the 1960s was a “wasteland” and he eagerly turned to Del Clark at Toronto for guidance. Clark, ironically, pointed to McGill as Canada’s leading sociology department and noted that much of the best recruitment centred upon individuals coming out of the University of Chicago. Fortuitously for York in light of its larger scheme to develop expertise in French Canada, Saywell successfully attracted Fred Elkin to inaugurate the study of sociology at the new school.

The combination of student activism, a burgeoning Canadian nationalism, and a climate of general political upheaval all coalesced to place the issue of faculty nationality near the top of the university agenda at York. Clearly a source of frustration for someone like Saywell, who found himself largely agreeing with student radicals when they vented their anger at the fact that of the 150 books listed in the general education course only five were by Canadians. However, when viewing this issue from a perspective informed by a belief in a truly liberal education which seeks to examine serious questions from a perspective “liberated” from the constraints of convention and contingency, a professor’s nationality should properly dwindle into insignificance. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto during the 1970s, I experienced the good, the bad, and the ugly of foreign-born professors. Yet each, in his or her unique ways, formed my understanding and learning. Walter Berns, Christian Bay, and Allan Bloom represented very distinctive types of university professor. Their national origin meant very little to me as it pertained to their individual contribution to my educational and intellectual growth.

In speaking about the impact of students as clients or customers Saywell is again helpful. He traces the process by which student representatives achieved status on university governing bodies and committees. There is something to be said for this type of inclusion in the machinery of university government; however, there is also a sense that considerable delusion resides in the premise that students know best what they need to know. Saywell expresses some chagrin at the worst aspects of the student invasion into university affairs and remains uncomfortable with faculty colleagues who aided and abetted this movement. Certainly grade inflation,

lowered standards, and the devaluing of direct classroom instruction are not exclusively the product of student participation in university decision-making; they are nonetheless an important contributing factor. Postmodern realities have served to undermine (or “disrupt”) hierarchy, authority, and genuinely free inquiry in ways that are not fully conducive to a substantively liberal education.

And yet, problems associated with the growth of York University posed by student radicals, activist faculty or enrolment increases pale in the face of the financial malaise that descended upon universities and colleges during the 1970s. Saywell was a front-row witness to a period of severe fiscal restraint that saw budget allocations reduced to the vanishing point for programs and faculty. This cash crunch was most keenly felt by untenured and sessional instructors. Saywell, operating as a hybrid creature attempting to bridge the claims of collegial academic excellence and the inexorable pressures of dwindling funds, paints a dispiriting portrait of the incommensurable realities that obtained in the Canadian university setting. He is constantly tasked with doing the impossible; pleasing (or appeasing) political overlords, university administrators, faculty colleagues, and students alike. In all instances, trade-offs, lay-offs, and compromises appear to be necessary with the total still being less than the sum of the parts. York University has not been able to achieve the “dream” of becoming the tranquil locus of a liberal education. As Saywell rightly recounts, it has grown into an educational entity with a reasonably respectable reputation. It is an institution equipped with several professional schools and departments that now draws up to 50,000 students to its 11 faculties.

One highly disturbing episode in Saywell’s treatment relates to the process for selecting a replacement for Murray Ross when he announced his resignation as university president in 1969. This account is made more dramatic because Saywell himself was a key contender for this post. The relentless manipulation of the executive search process by the power-brokers at York University is alarming, dispiriting, and profoundly indicative of the reality that universities are not the communities of scholars and truth-seekers that they present themselves as being. Increasingly, and perhaps inevitably, Canadian universities are in thrall to massive public and private interests that relentlessly drive them toward becoming engines of applied research, technological mastery, and practical efficiency. Saywell’s career in the realm of the Canadian university coincided with a period when it was just possible to dream of an exalted institution that might become something wonderful and meaningful. The awakened reality is that universities in Canada have been drawn into the vortex of those “businessmen” who propelled Murray Ross on his mission to erect York University. True scholars and educators, like George Grant, quickly understood that a university serving these “businessmen” could be nothing more than shadows and imaginings.

As an informed perspective on this important decade in the life of York University, Saywell has produced something both personal and accessible

to the general reader. He has, unfortunately, not been well served by his proofreaders and indexers. This, of course, may be the mark of cutbacks in the arena of Canadian university publishing. Overall, Saywell brings his excellent historian's training to the task of presenting a decade of university experience to those interested in what university deans "do" for a living. He is justifiably proud of his own accomplishments as a central player in the drama that was, and is, York University. And yet, the subtitle of his work, *York and the Great University Explosion, 1960-1973*, compels this reviewer to offer the point of clarification that while the "explosion" may have been great, York University was never really designed to achieve greatness.

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