# Reviews — Recensions

J.M. Cameron, *On the Idea of a University.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1978. 88 pp.

The prospect of a professor of philosophy undertaking an examination of the contemporary university through lenses molded by Henry Cardinal Newman evoked at first the image of a donnish Man of La Mancha. The great pleasure of this book comes in large part from the surprising success of the quest. In a field over which many have trodden before, the author reveals some trenchant insights, both humane and pragmatic, in a delightful style reminiscent of the age from which he draws his inspiration.

The book is in fact a collection of four lectures delivered by the author, a professor of philosophy at the University of Saint Michael's College (a Roman Catholic affiliate of the University of Toronto), in commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the University of Toronto and the 125th anniversary of Saint Michael's College; at the same time it represents the reflections of a man who has spent a life-time in academe and is in a position to compare the institutions of both sides of the Atlantic.

If the book has a principal strength, it is its perspicacity in discerning essence of the nature and problems of the university; its principal weakness might be seen as its failure to deal in detail with the mechanics of the institution: its government, its relationship with outside bodies; the many facets of the academic's role, including, for example, research; and so on. But these are endemic perhaps to the nature of a short book of observations. In this case an attempt to provide more complex prescriptions might well have destroyed the real merit of the work. The author provides a clear enough description of the essence of the institution. If we choose to accept it, the "missing" elements would be aspects of the redefined superstructure. The author is quite correct in leaving that to the collective wisdom of the university community.

The author's assessment of the modern university is not limited to Newman's ideas, although those provide a unifying theme. Indeed, Dr. Cameron succeeds in using Newman in ways that the good cardinal could never have foreseen, as, for example, in showing how, ironically, the liberal education of which Newman wrote is even more necessary for our generation than for the one he addressed. In Cameron's words: "My intention here... is to establish a sense of the gaps between worlds and times" (p. 4). He has identified a cultural continuum that his own as well as Newman's generation knew, but which broke during the mid twentieth century. "Men of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belong both to the primeval and to the civilized worlds, both to the oral and to the written culture...." (p. 5). In exploring this idea, Cameron provides an interesting perspective on the question of "relevance". "We begin to discover, with distress, that some of the most intelligent of those we teach in the universities have, for some reason we can't pick out with any certainty, either lost, substantially, this culture, or look upon it in an essentially external way: it does not strike them as a powerful instrument for the interpretation of

human life" (p. 6). Implicit in this are some rather important questions about the university's responsibility and performance in explaining its role, and about the validity of open choice for students in the selection of their university experiences.

Despite the fundamental changes Cameron sees taking place during this century, his lectures share with recent books like Murray Ross's *The University* the faith that the essence of the institution has survived in Canada. (Indeed, he makes a point of the value of preserving the Canadian institution's unique "economical" nature.) At the same time, he warns against complacent optimism, noting that universities can take only so much punishment, and issuing the haunting warning that "institutions can die" (p. xi). The dangers identified are not original with Cameron, but may be usefully re-examined in the special light he provides. His special vituperation ( a result, perhaps of his vocation as a philosopher) is directed against what he labels "parasense", the deterioration of language within academe. Considering his emphasis on the role of liberal education as providing a "common stock of symbols", his linking of the proper use of language and the basic mandate of the university is understandable. The real tragedy, if we accept Cameron's version of the generation conflict, lies perhaps in the fact that those perpetrating the language fraud are least capable of understanding the consequence of their actions.

All of the problems that Cameron identifies are to some extent self-imposed. Many are unfortunately exacerbated by inappropriate responses on the part of the university to criticism from outside. Cameron is annoyed at the university for its too ready acceptance of "unreality", as, for example, in responding, in the name of "accountability", to government requests for information the university knows is a quite inappropriate measurement of its functions. He argues not for intransigence, but for a more convincing explanation of why the imposed business-world measurements are not valid. Cameron might be accused of over-optimism in this particular, but in general he assumes for himself the "modesty" he prescribes for the academic community as a whole.

> There are not plausible educational saviours who, like the terrible political saviors of our time, have a single liberating doctrine. All we can hope to assemble is some knowledge of our history, some experience of men and affairs, some feeling for the wisdom to be found in our own long intellectual tradition. With the best will and best thought we may fail. Perhaps it is a mistake to fret too much over consequences. Christians above all ought not to be concerned about success, for they place themselves under the sign of a worldly failure as complete as failure can be. (p. 46).

Cameron's over-riding concern appears to be the need for a substantial re-ordering of the undergraduate liberal arts program, into a far less structured collegiate experience rather similar to the tutorial approach of Oxbridge. (His case is apparently for an optional such stream in the program, rather than for the program in toto to be restructured.) It is hard to disagree with his indictment of the North American modular B.A. with its interchangeable mass-produced components. But it is equally hard not to feel that he is fighting upstream against the current of time. He admits, in effect, that his plan for a return to a learning experience founded on what he sees as "natural relationships" among teacher, student and content is hardly compatible with the admittedly easier form in which academics have come to formulate their jobs. And if, as he feels, his approach finds a

natural enemy in the process of faculty collective bargaining, he may be treading unfortunately close to anachronism. Yet even if the details of Cameron's "elitist" liberal education could not be fully implemented, there is real strength to be seen in his proposals for a collegiate "home" for undergraduate students. He overcomes the almost immediate "yes. . .but. . .resources" response to such a desideratum by the rather intriguing suggestion that academic departments could fill the purpose when formal colleges are not available.

While Cameron's principal concern is with the undergraduate program, he does give some attention to what he considers to be a basically sound North American approach to graduate studies. His criticism is directed toward the much attacked but little altered graduate thesis, which he feels might be usefully altered to the French model. "The intention of such a system is to make sure that the student can work systematically in some central, important area of discipline." (p. 61) A similar question is raised of our wholesale use of the Ph.D. degree as virtually the only cap-stone of academic specialization. "The Doctor of Philosophy degree could. . .be a distinction awarded, perhaps rarely, as the D. Litt. is, and to those, who already in the middle of their careers as teachers, are moved to creative or scholarly work that deserves this kind of distinction." (p. 62) Cameron's points are founded not on elitism but on an assessment of the actual qualities that the programs should be producing, and deserve serious scrutiny on that basis.

Cameron's final words about his book are as follows: "it is a piece of harmless vanity in me to hope, not that these words. . .will be long remembered, but that what has been said may pass anonymously into the flood of talk about universities and in that way make some differences to how things are done and to the look of things" (p. 88). If this is his goal, he has succeeded well. We are provided not with blueprints for reforms, but with a renewed sense of what a university should and can be.

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Oswald Hall and Richard Carlton, *Basic Skills at School and Work: The Study of Albertown,* Toronto, Ontario Economic Council, 1977. 326 pp.

Hall and Carlton's research monograph *Basic Skills at School and Work* merits considerable attention. It is an important work, in part, because it is a community study which examines the interrelationships of those major sectors (various school systems, teachers, students, employees and employers) concerned with basic skills in English and Mathematics. Although the definition of basic skills may be considered problematic, they "concentrate upon the 'fit' between skill proficiencies and ths situational demands of both employment and academic settings". Even though the generalizability of a community study may be questionble, to investigate the complex social organization encompassing basic skills may require this approach.

Methodologically, the monograph is a good example of "triangulation" as both multiple data sources and multiple data collection techniques are employed. These include secondary