

is nonetheless ultimately a contribution to the more interesting task of establishing and assessing the institution's role in the intellectual life of its communities; one must understand the structure of a university before one can deal with the intellectual life that is its *raison d'être*. Institutional history is the basis of intellectual history.

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John A.B. McLeish, *A Canadian For All Seasons (The John E. Robbins Story)*. Toronto, Lester and Orpen, 1978.

Professor John McLeish's biography of John Robbins is not an easy book to review in terms which will be fair both to him and to his subject. It has a clear preponderance of admirable merit but is marred by some surprising and unnecessary defects. Part of the problem derives from the fact that Professor McLeish probably never quite differentiated between two distinct roles: helping John Robbins to write an autobiography, or writing a biography with an independent point of view of his own. The dilemma was perhaps natural enough in view of their close personal friendship, and the fact that the author was given such extensive and generous assistance by John Robbins himself who submitted to more than twenty interviews and who obviously made available his personal files, and gave advice about other sources of information and relevant documentation. Although Professor McLeish has most diligently assembled and presented, with commendable accuracy, essential historical data on developments in the academic world in particular, which might otherwise never be as usefully recorded, he lapses occasionally in his final chapters, as will be noted, into journalistic summaries which are disappointingly flat.

There is a sustained glow of genial goodwill, if we except a few shafts despatched in the direction of Vincent Massey and MacKenzie King, and an absence of incisive and critical appraisal, of which John Robbins is altogether capable in realistic judgment of his own enterprises and of his associates in many good causes. As a result Professor McLeish somewhat undercuts the credibility of this sunny account for those who are not familiar with the extraordinary record which John Robbins has, in fact, achieved.

One more general criticism must be offered before proceeding to the more congenial task of singling out the many merits of this book. The author does have a certain way with the English language! He uses "religiosity" in a favourable sense, is fond of "rationales", and of "vaediction", and uses "prevision" for "foresight", minor surprises to startle the reader accustomed to more austere usage in these matters. Moreover, his style has its effervescent moments, bubbling over with such flourishes as: "The dropout rate was ferocious"; "The project was obviously intended to be an injection directly into the thin bloodstream of Canadian adult education. . ."; "the ideas (on TV) . . . were those which captured the attention of the volatile and almost incestuous semi-plastic world of the television-makers"; and, in this tribute to the severe winter weather in Brandon, "so intense that the blood in one's nostrils tingles like sparkling fire." These, however, are minor and incidental distractions along the way, and should not impede recognition of the substantial merits of the book as a whole.

For many readers the first several chapters will provide particular pleasure. The account of John Robbins' early years on farms in Ontario and Manitoba, and his interrupted efforts to complete his education, is most felicitous, and reminds one of the similar portrayals in J.M. Minifie's autobiographical "Homesteader", and Donald Creighton's memoir of Harold Innis. Relatives and early friends are characterized briefly but vividly, and with sensitive understanding, in a narrative which the biographer could only have derived from Robbins himself. These chapters go far to explain the personal qualities and the motivation which he has exhibited during the rest of his life.

Similarly, Chapters IV and V which relate his speedy involvement in an astonishing number of local and national organizations are most revealing. Coming to Ottawa in 1930 at the age of 27, for a position in the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, an unlikely base of operations, he was repeatedly drawn into many Canadian committees and associations coming into existence during the following two decades, usually in some executive capacity, often as secretary-treasurer. As part of his duties at DBS he had sought out key individuals across Canada to provide information on statistical developments in higher education, and soon he had a network of friends, and a store of information which others found to be a reliable source in locating fellow workers from one coast to the other. So, he was a participant in initial gatherings of adult educators, of librarians, of individuals concerned about national broadcasting or citizenship or youth problems, to mention a few, such meetings leading to the emergence of new national societies. This, in turn, brought international connections with the great American foundations, Carnegie and Rockefeller especially, and with UNESCO. Since his personal style was unobtrusive, almost anonymous, his speech judicious, deliberate and understated, with none of the usual attributes of aggressive promotion, one can only conclude that his effective involvement as a participant in innumerable good causes is to be attributed to a systematic and tenacious concentration on essential issues and a disciplined allotment of his time. Needless to say, not all his activities were equally productive in the long run, and some of the organizations to which he devoted his efforts were not particularly successful or necessary. Indeed, considering the proliferation of academic and related societies in Canada during the past few decades it is legitimate to inquire whether some of them serve any major productive result. Such shadows of doubt do not darken this account, but, in retrospect at least, John Robbins must have made such critical evaluations in certain cases. It is unfortunate that we are not given the benefit of his candid judgment, except by implications so discreet and tactful that many readers will miss them. However, there can be no such doubt about his service for twenty-one years as Secretary-Treasurer of the Social Science Research Council, and for seventeen of these years in the same position with the Humanities Research Council, in both cases from the foundation of the organization. The Councils played an immensely important role in the development of aid for Canadian scholars in the non-science disciplines, and their evolution properly receives extended treatment in two special chapters. These are preceded by one chapter recounting his long cooperation with his friend Walter Herbert of the Canada Foundation, and followed by another chapter describing his experience as the Editor of the *Encyclopedia Canadiana*. Both make decidedly agreeable reading and it is pleasant to find space given to a generous but justified tribute to the work of Herbert, often ignored or little appreciated. The creation of the new encyclopedia was a laborious but stimulating task for John

Robbins, and this account of his six years in bringing its ten volumes to completion is brightened with a number of delightful and fascinating details of the experience.

Still, the heart of the book for serious students of higher education is in the careful and extended account of the origin and growth of the two Research Councils, probably the favourite organizations of John Robbins. In that context this reviewer must confess a personal bias, having first met him thirty-five years ago when the Humanities Research Council was organized, and having seen much of him, especially during the next twenty years, and on a number of subsequent occasions. As a result he shares the warm esteem which Professor McLeish reflects in his biography.

It is a notable quality of this section of the book that the author has organized and deployed a large mass of detail with clarity and a high level of accuracy. (Since he gives the correct name of the Humanities Association of Canada and its proper date of foundation on page 171, he may be forgiven for getting them both wrong on page 16.) Of equal importance, he is also successful in conveying the emotional atmosphere at certain critical moments in the history of the Councils. His account of several episodes in which some strong feeling was in evidence is exactly right according to the recollections of this reviewer. Two such examples may be offered, in connection with the emergence of the Canada Council in 1957, and the abrupt and arbitrary adjustment of the working relationship between the Canada Council and the two Research Councils in 1963.

In the first instance, to supplement the record, the impression that Brooke Claxton, the new Chairman of the Canada Council, was making his preliminary soundings with the American foundations with scant regard for the past services of the two Councils and of John Robbins personally so incensed one distinguished and sensitive member of the Humanities Research Council that he urged most vehemently that members of both Councils should reject appointment to the Canada Council, if offered! (Of the thirty-two members of the Councils only one, this reviewer, did in fact receive such an invitation which he accepted, taking a longer view, while maintaining his membership in the Research Council.) In any case the anticipated problems were smoothly solved in the early months of the existence of the new Council and a satisfactory relationship established which was maintained for the next six years.

The fundamental reason for the breakdown of 1963 is evidently not known to the biographer although he takes the explanation part way. By that year the last of the original St. Laurent appointments were leaving the Canada Council and the succession of Diefenbaker replacements had markedly altered the spirit of the Council. Three of them had held membership in or close involvement with the National Research Council, and wished the practice of the Canada Council to be changed to conform to the policies of the N.R.C. (A year later, under the same misguided auspices, a strenuous but unsuccessful effort was made to impose a regulation that the pre-doctoral awards of the Canada Council be tenable only in Canada, as was the case with the similar awards given by the N.R.C. That restriction would have certainly played havoc with the options of young scholars hoping to study abroad in such specialties as foreign language and literature, art, and history.)

There are a number of areas in which the activities of the two Research Councils and those of the Canada Council must have intersected more extensively even than these several instances would suggest. This aspect of the record has not been presented by the

author, possibly because sources of information within the Canada Council were not available to him. In any event, the wonder is that the Research Councils, having paved the way for the Canada Council and having been largely superseded by it, did work out a useful collaboration with it which has fully justified their continued survival.

Two further chapters deal with the Robbins' nine years as President of Brandon College, renamed Brandon University during his tenure, and his three years in Rome as the first Canadian Ambassador to the Holy See, and both somewhat disappointed the expectations of the reviewer.

Robbins presided over a major expansion of the College during which academic offerings and staff were increased, and the student body almost quadrupled. The story is told in general, almost journalistic terms, all the more puzzling since the author was himself then on the staff of Brandon and has his own recollections to add. Still the impressive story does not come across fully and lacks the zest and the precision of earlier chapters. Nor does he explain convincingly the dramatic events culminating in the sudden conclusion of Robbins' term of office.

The year 1968-69 was difficult for many university presidents in Canada, and some of them resigned in 1969, or soon after, disillusioned by the squalid extremes of student agitation and its usually covert support by a few faculty radicals. Robbins suffered the calculated personal insults and indignities which were the deliberate techniques of these agitators and in disgust at the prospect that they might continue in the following year he announced his resignation in the late Spring of 1969, even though he apparently had the full support of his Board and the large majority of the staff and the students. His unexpected action was widely publicized and justified by him and others as "a president's protest", designed as a significant and formidable counter to student protests. Perhaps it was, and this may be the complete explanation, sceptics to the contrary, but, whatever the intention, it gratified student schemers on his own campus and elsewhere in Canada, and came as a disappointment to hard pressed presidents in other provinces who preferred not to yield to the cynical and contrived manipulations of a handful of young "activists" who fancied themselves genuine revolutionaries overthrowing their oppressors.

Within a few months his career took a completely unexpected turn when he was offered the Ambassadorship in Rome, which was to take him, for the first time, into a totally unfamiliar environment and to immerse him in the set patterns of diplomatic activity. He had had no experience in the routine of diplomacy, least of all with such a unique entity as the Vatican, with its own traditions in these matters.

Since his first months in Rome were preoccupied with the setting up of a new mission and with tiresome and lengthy distractions in securing office space and an official residence his spirit must have already been somewhat jaded when he finally settled into a round of activities which evidently struck him as largely artificial. It was a new experience for him to be involved in work in which he was not a professional. The art and the practice of formal diplomacy is not to everyone's taste, and involves a large expenditure of time for small gains. One senses that his frustrations outnumbered his satisfactions and that he completed his term with some relief in spite of the other compensations of life in Rome and Italy.

His incidental comments on Pope Paul VI, and some of the high officials with whom he dealt are of much interest, although in the latter instance he attributes the extensive

secretiveness which he felt to characterize the Curia to its members “being essentially timid in the lay world”. It is a novel diagnosis but for others who have had experience with them “timid” is not a word which comes easily to mind for members of Curia!

When he returned to Ottawa from Rome, John Robbins was seventy years of age and entitled to call it a day. Even so, he promptly resumed his characteristic concern and active support for various Canadian organizations, and has recently served as President of the Canadian Writers’ Foundation, and (currently) of the World Federalist Association of Canada. This book is a useful and welcome record of alifetime of consistent and unremitting service, a deserved tribute to a good man.

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