

Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Robin S. Harris. *English Studies at Toronto: a History*. The Governing Council, University of Toronto, 1988. 310 pages. Review by Kathleen Wall, Assistant Professor, University of Manitoba

Robin S. Harris, a former professor of the University of Toronto English Department and currently University of Toronto historian, has been grappling for some time with a history of the U of T. Finding that as a "multiversity" it had no unified history after its 1956 decision to double enrolment, Professor Harris focussed instead on one of the largest departments in the Faculty of Arts, the Department of English Language and Literature. The result, *English Studies at Toronto*, published by the Governing Council of the University of Toronto, is a work of mixed quality and usefulness.

The early chapters, particularly those covering the periods from 1842 through 1926 (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) suffer from Professor Harris's choice of a strictly chronological approach. Perhaps because those years do not fall within the range of living memory, his writing lacks focus, purpose, and the kind of analysis of fact one expects in such a book. We are given no reason, for example, why the years from 1842–1889 provide a logical unit until the last sentence of the chapter. Here we realize that these dates range from the appointment of Crowley, a tutor in English, to the appointment of W.J. Alexander, the first University College English Department Chair at U of T specifically trained for the task of teaching English Language and Literature. In between, however, Chapter 1 is a mishmash of information about the growth of Universities in Canada, the rise of English Language and Literature as a respectable area of study for the B A, the University of Toronto Act and U of T's relationship to its colleges, a lengthy discussion of the testimonials of Daniel Wilson, sample test questions for the 1858 examination paper, the development of the English Department at McGill University, the 1887 Federation Act, the development of the Honors BA, and the education of W.J. Alexander. Because there is no single point of gravity which might have been provided by focussing on the development of English Language and Literature as a recognized subject, the increasing credibility of English studies at Toronto – the facts related by Professor Harris seem random.

Chapters 2 and 3 suffer from similar flaws. These chapters also seem to lack a thesis: once again we know only at the end of Chapter 2 why it ends in 1906. We also begin to note the tendency of Professor Harris not to draw conclusions about his data or to follow up the implications of his statements. He notes, for example, that it is "significant" that W.J. Alexander's high school textbooks contain largely

poetry, but fails to tell us why this is significant. We wonder why department salaries and enrolments should be “borne in mind when examining the changes introduced to both the pass and honour courses” (32). Certainly Chapter Two would have been much more effectively organized around its two major themes: the influence of Alexander and the institutional changes in the structure of the University of Toronto that had an impact upon the department.

I can only conclude that the archival nature of the material Professor Harris was working with made it difficult, in the instances of these three chapters, to provide a focus, or to draw conclusions; hence information is given for information’s sake, with an implicit belief that a mere orderly marshalling of fact must inevitably have some significance for a reader. Certainly many of the flaws I found aggravating in these early chapters disappear once Professor Harris’s venue falls within living memory and it becomes easier to draw conclusions, to see relationships among facts.

By Chapter Three, however, we begin to recognize that each chapter has an almost set series of components that include comments upon external forces that have an impact upon the English program, whether it be veterans returning from war, the baby boom, the changed requirements for secondary teachers; a description of the institutional changes within the University that influence departmental structures and programs; the development of the undergraduate curriculum and the growth of the graduate program; research, scholarship and publication among faculty members; the development of the University of Toronto Quarterly; the use of funds from the Representative Poetry text; and the department’s relationship to the faculty of education and to other faculties that require English courses. Because the book has no index, (to my mind, a major flaw in its usefulness and effectiveness) it is difficult to trace these thematic units from chapter to chapter; but once done, we see that Professor Harris has collected some interesting material that might perhaps have been better served by a thematic rather than chronological organization and needed more comment than he typically gives.

It is interesting, for example to watch the growth and evolution of the program of English Studies at the University of Toronto. Originally represented by the tutor, Crowley (whose first name is not even contained in the records), the teaching of English was limited to assisting students with their written work. Crowley and his successors were in no way involved in the teaching of literature. The first Canadian professor of English was Daniel Wilson, whose training was in history; the general BA in English obtained in his department in the 1850’s did not require a student to read a poem, novel, or play; focus was on the history of English language and literature. Only honours students were exposed to a few sacred texts written, one gathers, before 1800. In 1877, students in the Pass course were finally introduced to literary texts via Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene* and a book of *Paradise Lost*. At the same time, the curriculum of the Honours Course began to add more recent poetry – through Wordsworth. Both courses of study (although Harris does not say this) show the Department’s reluctance to make any hasty

judgements about the appropriateness of more contemporary literature to the study of English Language and Literature, though certainly the Honours curriculum establishes the historical approach and thoroughness of Toronto's program that endured through to the sixties.

As if to illustrate the extent to which universities are not entirely isolated from the changes occurring in the larger human community, Professor Harris gives a detailed account of how, over the years, the curricula of both the Pass or General BA and the Honours BA undergo changes dictated from without. Requiring Senior Matriculation for admission (Grade 13) meant eliminating the first year of the Pass course, for example. When the Provincial Department of Education decided to separate English and History as secondary school teacher specializations in 1936, the Department responded by evolving an English Language and Literature Honours whose options might be changed slightly, or whose sequence of course requirements might be shifted for pedagogical reasons, but whose program remained essentially unchanged until 1969.

The sixties were a difficult time for the English Department: students were making several demands. First, they wanted a "relevant" curriculum, which the Department bravely addressed through the necessary updating of its courses. Second, students generally wanted more control over the decisions that affected their lives, and hence wanted membership – first non-voting and then voting – on a whole host of committees. From within the University structure itself came the Macpherson report which caused the demise of what one suspects to be a cherished aspect of the Toronto Department(s) of English: the Honours Course. At the same time, the Commission on University Governance issued its report, *Community in University Government*, which attempted to address the administrative difficulties of running a multiversity. One of their conclusions was to assign "responsibility for the development of academic policy to an Academic Affairs Committee, but this Committee does not necessarily include a representative of all departments or even of all faculties" (152–3). Except for noting that "The English Language and Literature course was no more" (159), Professor Harris is curiously devoid of comment upon the Department's reaction to these pressures coming both within and without. I felt dissatisfied with the chapter on the sixties because it gave so little insight into the Department's perception of the pressures placed on educational institutions by the sixties. Professor Harris failed to take an exceptional opportunity to describe the response to change made by individuals in an institution.

Professor Harris's book does, however, provide us with insight into how reluctant the ivory tower is to greet other kinds of curricular change. In the earlier periods we cannot help noting that recognizing literature written after Wordsworth (with the odd exception of Scott) came very slowly in the nineteenth century. Similarly, the recognition of Canadian Literature did not come with undue haste. As late as 1964, the Honours course in American and Canadian Literature (why were they lumped together?) included 90% American Literature. A whole course in Canadian Literature was available in 1956, but was designed as a "Religious

Knowledge Option" for honours students in areas other than English. This is in spite of the fact that the U of T Department had on its staff, at various times, Earle Birney, Robertson Davies, E.J. Pratt, Margaret Avison, and David Godfrey.

Professor Harris is also very responsible in reporting on the status of women in his Department: how women are used as the only "temporary assistants" in 1919; how they were confined to lecturer rank in 1926, many of them part-time. During the period between 1926 and 1944, the male staff, with the exception of those who retired or resigned "continued on the staff throughout this eighteen-year period. Of the ladies, only Mrs. Kirkwood did so – and not without difficulty"(78). Once the University began to feel the impact of the Depression, The President of the University asked Malcolm Wallace, then head of the department, to arrange for her resignation since her husband held a full-time employment; Wallace refused. Harris also notes that there "is considerable evidence to support the charge" that the University of Toronto English Department discriminated against women in its hiring policies during this period. Interestingly enough, however, there appears to be no discrimination in the awarding of Ph.D's to women: almost half the graduates from the program at that time were women. Although Mr. Harris does not directly say so, his presentation of data suggests a kind of double standard: it was all right for women to be educated. It was not all right for them to work. Since 1965, however, the Department has consistently hired women, though what percentage of its current staff is female is not noted.

This reticence on Professor Harris's part to discuss the implications of the data he presents constitutes one of the major weaknesses of his work. Certainly some of the reader's frustrations about the work's organization could have been obviated by an index, though I feel that organization along thematic lines, with a chapter, for instance, on the development of the undergraduate curriculum, or a chapter on the continual administrative reorganization of the University of Toronto and its impact upon the English Department would have allowed for a greater sense of continuity and would have given the author more opportunity for the kind of editorial commentary that the book lacks. But even in those instances, like his chapter on the Sixties, when the unity of the material begged for and allowed something more than the presentation of fact, Professor Harris is curiously reticent. The nebulousness of the first three chapters indicates that it is important for meaningful histories to be written by someone who lives through the period and who can document the continuity created by a zeitgeist that is probably not recorded in archival materials; one only wishes that Professor Harris had been more willing to do this for the lengthy era when he was allied with the English Department at the U of T.