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Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Anderson, Caroline and Steen B. Esbensen. *Who's Afraid of Liberal Education? / Qui a peur de l'éducation générale?* Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1989 ISBN 2-7766-0276-4. Pp. 114. Reviewed by Dr. Roseann Runte, Principal, Glendon College, York University

Essentially the proceedings (minus the workshops) of a 1988 conference by the same title, this collection of eleven papers attempts to continue the discussions on Canadian post-secondary education which were begun at the 1987 National Forum on Post-secondary Education held in Saskatoon. However, the "spirit of Saskatoon" would appear to have been missing in Ottawa. In Saskatoon, there was a positive feeling generated perhaps by the knowledge that history was being made. For the first time, representatives of all provinces and territories, of diverse minorities, of all levels of education, of all levels of government and of the many professions, trades and unions had gathered together to concentrate their best thoughts and to dedicate their time and energy to the question of post-secondary education. And from all those different groups we heard a resounding note of confidence in the universities and in their mission, an understanding of the problems caused by attempting to maintain a high level of quality while remaining accessible (and this on a shoestring budget which grows smaller each year as demands on the system increase), and a sense of optimism that a "new classicism" would be born and would carry us forward into the 1990s and the next century.

At the Ottawa conference, only Jon K. Grant, who called himself "a token businessman at your conference" (p. 33), noted that government funding in Ontario is 35% less for a first-year university student than for a secondary school student (p. 36). He was alone in suggesting that the universities require greater financial support for a new agenda. The remainder of the speakers could be divided into two groups: those who explained a particular program and those who attempted to underline the problems in liberal education in Canada. This litany of problems and attempts at defining the limits of the debate were apparently so dismal that "one participant remarked that the most depressing thing about the conference was learning of obstacles he hadn't thought of before" (p. 99). Perhaps the highest tribute paid to the intellectual life of our universities at the conference was offered by Howard Clark who said "it is not too bad. It could be better but it's certainly not disastrous" (p. 41).

Papers by Adrian Marriage, Howard Clark, Peter Morgan and Claude Hamel gave illustrations of innovative general education/first-year arts/liberal arts programs. The handout to which Professor Marriage referred was not included; thus the reader will have to consult the U.B.C. calendar for this information. Jon

Grant, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Quaker Oats Company of Canada and former Chairman of the Board of Trent University, provided some interesting reflections on the differing views of CEOs and Personnel Officers with regard to hiring humanities graduates. He also offered some positive suggestions for the future development of universities, especially in the area of environmental concerns.

Charles Karelis's excellent discussion of trends in the United States gave a clear and succinct overview of a complex situation. He placed the debate in a historical context and explained the current controversy centered around Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* and questions of individualism vs. epistemological relativism, the possibility of objective knowledge, and the issue of whether universities should attempt to unify culture longitudinally or cross-sectionally. He explained the difficulty in defining liberal education and a liberal arts curriculum. He outlined the imperfect compromise he sees being adopted in the United States.

Lise Bissonnette, who formulated the rallying cry at Saskatoon, appeared to regret her former optimism. She pointed at the reasons the "new classicism" would never succeed: the structure of the institutions, the education of the faculty, the nature of the student body (with its important part-time component). While she still saw a need for the new classicism, (a sense of history, writing and mathematical skills), she doubted that the workforce really requires more than a few senior executives educated as thinkers and then only "from time to time" (p. 28). She ironically defined humanism as "la *prétention* de former plutôt que de simplement informer ..." (p. 30). Finally, she also criticized the "core curriculum" concept which excludes the present and the future (not to mention Canada, Québec and women).

Gilles Paquet's article provided an introduction to the volume and attempted to redefine the "problematique" (p. 8) by indicating that liberal education is part of a bigger concern for the inadequacy of curricula, a lack of confidence in the management of post-secondary education, the dominion of rationality, the naïve characterization of knowledge, content-free education etc. Teaching is less at issue than is learning and Paquet's article mentions a new theory of perception which is not discipline-based but learner-oriented and involves exploration and playfulness. Paquet seeks the epistemological questions as the basis for the discussion. He proposes a broad approach that covers a "variety of types of thinking ... mathematical, logical, lateral etc. (DeBono 1969)" (p. 14). This approach bears some resemblance in concept to the University "Core-light" (p. 54) curricula at Harvard and Miami Universities and to goals of the traditional liberal arts program. The concept would therefore require further definition but is indeed intriguing.

This book presents several points of consensus: a yearning for a "new classicism" in the curriculum and serious doubts about the possibility of achieving this goal. "New classicism", like liberal education, liberal arts and the questions to which the conference was intended to reply remain undefined. Indeed, at times "new classicism" appears strangely reminiscent of the traditional definition of

liberal arts. This new curriculum apparently includes good doses of the humanities, the social sciences, sciences (including mathematics) and languages (several participants considered bilingualism essential for the Canadian student of the future). The "new classicist" curriculum will combine the proper degree of content and skills and will possibly be imparted in new ways through new structures, the creation of which is so fraught with difficulty that it inspired the participants with despair. (But then, the acquisition of knowledge was never a rose-petal-strewn path!)

The book also lacks a good overview of what is actually happening in Canada. Skolnik mentions in his conclusion the innovative programs at UBC, Concordia and McMaster. The conference features Dalhousie, UBC, the University of Toronto, and the Université du Québec. But what about the University of King's College and all the little institutions like Glendon, Mount Allison, Acadia, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface, Sainte-Anne, etc? There are, without doubt, many other interesting and innovative curricular developments occurring in the country.

The Ottawa conference was perhaps too internalized and too introspective. The speakers included only one business person and no representatives of other professions or government. There was only one woman among the eleven speakers, only 1 1/2 papers in French, one speaker from the Maritimes and one from the West. Nonetheless, the proceedings are worth reading. The book is thoughtful and provocative. It is most definitely a call for the leadership and the vision necessary to take our universities and our society into the twenty-first century. This book was intended to stimulate universities to seek and implement change. I hope we will all join together to take up the challenge and that our efforts will be given the necessary financial support by the business community and by government.

Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989, Pp. xxx, 381. $34.95 cloth, $16.95 paper. Reviewed by J. Donald Wilson, University of British Columbia, Faculty of Education.

Critics are often harsh in their reviews of collected essays, echoing Woodrow Wilson's warning while he was still an historian at Princeton: "No amount of uniform type and sound binding can metamorphose a series of individual essays into a book." But having been a book editor myself, I am more inclined to the appraisal Robert Fulford made of Duke Ellington in *Best Seat in the House*, when it comes to the task of a conscientious and efficient book editor: "He was an artist who both practised his own art and created spaces where others could practise theirs." In their work at putting together *Youth, University and Canadian Society*, editors Paul Axelrod and John Reid amply attest to my contention.

For years the history of higher education in Canada operated in the shadows of the mainstream of Canadian educational history. Inspired by the "new" social history of the 1960s, the history of Canadian education attained new levels of