

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Grant, Judith. S. (2015). *A Meeting of Minds: The Massey College Story*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 673 (body). Price: \$52.50 CAD (cloth).**

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“Massey [College] is as close to the cozy community of Hogwarts as one can get in this country,” blogged Faye Murrin of Memorial University, “...an inspired brown-bricked, sixties concept of the cloistered university – an intellectual’s dream” (Murrin, 2011).

Although directly involving only a miniscule number people, Massey College is a prominent embodiment of the conservative, elite archetype for universities that has permeated thinking about higher education for generations, evident even in the early discourse about some of Canada’s newer universities such as Trent University and the University of Victoria. More recently, Green College and St. John’s College at the University of British Columbia have been influenced by this ideal. Massey College’s national significance has far exceeded its size.

The college opened in 1963 as a residential, postgraduate institution affiliated with the University of Toronto. Today, it has something like 150 graduate students from across the disciplines as junior fellows, 300 or so distinguished faculty and public figures as senior fellows, and a few hundred other people associated with it (as “Quadranglers” and in other capacities). A longstanding sabbatical program for half a dozen mid career journalists has also been maintained.

The historiography of Canadian universities has not been especially robust, although it has strengthened in recent decades. Paul Axelrod (1982) noted that the authors tended to be non historians who wrote in ways that were celebrationist and apologetic in theme. Nancy Sheehan (1985) commented that the histories were often one-sided, in-house affairs that suffered from both too much and too little information. *A Meeting of Minds: The Massey College Story* falls rather more within this tradition than might be desirable, as indeed do a number of other recent postsecondary histories marking various anniversaries of the institutions’ founding.

*A Meeting of Minds* was commissioned in 2004 in anticipation of Massey’s fiftieth anniversary in 2012/13. The author, Judith Grant, had previously written a biography of

Massey's first master, writer Robertson Davies. Grant touches on her own long-standing association with the college, cautioning that it colours some of her views. Extensively researched, the volume draws upon college documents and numerous interviews to narrate a history from the point of view of administrators rather than of students or those in the external community.

Robertson Davies continued as master until 1981. Grant organized her book according to the tenures of Davies and the three successive masters – the fifth and current master, Hugh Segal, did not assume the role until mid 2015 – with loose subsections on such topics as college life, the planning of new initiatives, and the college's public profile. Curiously for what is essentially a chronological account, timelines are occasionally disjointed or opaque, and thus can sometimes be difficult to follow. Grant also tends to assume readers are already familiar with the college's terminology and customs, perhaps a reflection of a readership envisaged as being drawn mainly from the college's community.

Grant provides a rich, chronological description of college life, creating a substantial foundation for any subsequent analyses and critiques of the college's impacts. The writing is inviting, but for audiences not especially interested in the abundant details about sherry receptions and after-dinner entertainment, the volume is also amenable to skimming and sampling. The overall ethos of the college and the glimpse into the social aspects of a particular form of academic life may be as important to the general reader as many of the specifics. In any event, the book is written in a close and personal style, full of anecdotes, rather than as a distant technical report.

Vincent Massey, Canada's first native-born governor general, conceived the idea of a male residential college for "graduate students of special promise" and arranged funding from his family's foundation to launch it. An anglophile traditionalist, Massey's vision was shaped by All Souls College at Oxford, a college with no undergraduates and whose focus was academic research.

Some of the college's early stresses may sound all too familiar to today's academics – the search for sustainable finances and complaints about food, for example – but other challenges concerned exclusionary social relationships. Within a few years, a sense of alienation had developed among the junior fellows and women did not become full participants until the mid seventies. It was not until the late eighties that Grant characterizes Massey College as collegial and egalitarian.

The 1970s saw some initiatives to raise the college's profile that met with varying success. The Massey College Lectures began in 1974 as an attempt by senior members to promote the college as centre of research and publication. (These lectures are distinct from the Massey Lectures that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation established in 1961 in honour of the Massey Commission's contribution to Canada's cultural life and which it broadcasts nationally on radio each year. The college came to co-sponsor the CBC series in 1989.) In contrast, discussions in the late seventies to headquarter an Institute of Advanced Studies at the University of Toronto at Massey College came to naught.

Initiatives in the 1980s included efforts to increase the number of people involved in the college community. This led to an expansion in the number of non residential fellowships, the addition of associates, and increased attention to alumni. The commitment to a holistic, interdisciplinary vision of education, one which promotes a way of being and not simply the acquisition of knowledge, continued.

The list of notable people who have passed through Massey College reads like an extract from *Who's Who*. In 1997, for example, when former Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau spent several days a month at the college, he overlapped with the ex-premier of Ontario, Bob Rae, and writer-in-residence, Jane Urquhart.

The art of gracious living and a sense of *noblesse oblige* permeate this account of Massey College. In describing manners, old school traditions, and social networks, the book illustrates some of the mechanisms by which universities can contribute to the creation and transmission of social and cultural capital among members of the Canadian establishment. As such, it is perhaps equally of interest to sociologists and social historians as to educators. 🍁

### References

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