

Book Review / Compte rendu

Marsden, L.R. (Ed.) (2016). *Leading the modern university: York University's presidents on continuity and change, 1974-2014*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Pages: 227. Price: 29.96 CDN (hard cover).

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This book is a collection of memoirs written by each of the five presidents at York University, from 1974 until today, and edited by Lorna Marsden, President of York University from 1997 – 2007. What an interesting, well written, and relevant book, developed in collaboration with her presidential colleagues. Each president, in turn, describes aspects of the office deemed fit for public consumption, each in their unique voice and perspective. At a time when university seas are white-capped always, the overriding theme that emerges for the reader is 'it was ever thus'.

The university environment is not well understood by those beyond the President's Office, even less so the demanding role of president. Harry Arthur, President of York from 1985-92, captures some of the complexity, stating York...

"... is a corporation as well as an intellectual and social community. It earns revenue, incurs expenses, and is disciplined by a bottom line – a balanced budget. It owns land and financial assets; it sells food, shelter, and parking spaces; it has its own security force, heating plant, and waste disposal system; it is constantly involved in legal transactions and disputes; and it is one of the largest employers in metropolitan Toronto. Unlike business corporations, however, the measure of a university's "corporate success" is not the size of bonuses it awards to its executives or the dividends it pays to its shareholders, but the extent to which the quality of campus intellectual and social life is enriched" (p. 76).

As institutions of public importance and taxpayer expense, it is in relation to the above quote that the presidents describe university challenges, frequently naming both specific players and "the issues faced, the priorities they chose and the way each dealt with the constant challenges of government policies, funding, governance, academic matters, and organization" (p.5).

The opening chapter provides An overview of the history of York University from 1960-1973. Issues of establishment and change, from its beginnings as an institution with 73 full-time undergrads enrolled in 1960, to enrollment in full and part time as well as graduate programs totaling some 22,766 students at the beginning of the 1974 academic year. This time of storming and forming had corresponding “downstream” effects for all successors. Two foundational themes, politics and funding, are established, and permeate the collection. It was ever thus.

The reflection by Ian Macdonald, president from 1974-84, identifies that “Every president arrives with a list of objectives and quickly discovers a group of imperatives” (p. 38). Macdonald concentrates on the leadership requirements in the academic environment, stating “We must never forget that a university is a collegial institution, not a corporation” (p.33). What a pleasant thought. The issues of collective efficacy experienced by York in its forming, the role of women in the institution, the decentralization dilemmas, York’s role in both the community and the international contexts, the academic and emerging unionized environments, and funding. While considerable organizational complexity is evident, Macdonald pauses to celebrate the joys of convocation, quoting former premier and York chancellor John Robarts who commented “this was one of those rare occasions where everyone was a winner” (p. 34). Additionally, he identifies a student who, on seeing the president remarked “You look exactly like what I visualized a professor to be” (p. 45). A full page picture is included in the book in relation to each presidential memoir. It is clear this is true; there is a professorial *je ne sais quoi* when pondering the image of Ian Macdonald.

Harry Arthurs titles his chapter “ ‘The economy is the secret police’: York University, 1985-92”, and begins his memoir with “No York president has ever had too much money or too few ambitions” (p. 59) Arthur highlights the struggles for funding with larger, older universities in the province, and specifically identifies the niggly neighbor down the road saying, “older universities were able to attract greater support from their more affluent and numerous alumni than newer ones; and the University of Toronto, in particular, exercised unique, often clandestine, influence over public policies and the expenditure of public funds” (p. 60). In case this comment was overlooked by the reader, he addresses the issue again, saying “Having experienced the power and influence of the self-identified elite universities (led by the University of Toronto), we learned our lesson: York needed allies if it was to protect its interests in future public policy debates” (p. 63). Arthurs concludes with three lessons learned:

- Change in universities needs to be expressed and proposed in academic vernacular. University administrators need not think, talk or act like academics, but they must believe like academics.
- All universities feed at the same trough; they must learn to use their collective power to influence change.
- University presidents must ensure faculty and students have the resources they need and the support they deserve. (p. 86).

Susan Mann’s “Tales of York, 1992-97” is told first person, from the perspective of the university itself. Of significant importance during her presidency was the securing of a \$15 million donation from Seymour Schulich. Additionally, the establishment of joint programs with Seneca College, a first in Ontario, something since replicated by many universities, broke new ground provincially. Business measures applied to measure a uni-

versity's worth are challenged directly succinctly, "Universities had traditions much longer than those of business for "quality control": external peer review of scholarly worth; program reviews done by external assessors at the graduate and undergraduate levels; student and colleague evaluation of teaching" (p. 112).

Lorna Marsden's chapter "Years of Transition, 1997-2007" follows. Themes of finance, accountability, the subway, politics, and the effects of a faculty strike are highlighted, as are the new complexities of the electronic era that emerged at the time. The university's rapid growth and capital expenditures are also featured. Marsden concludes saying "Perhaps universities are doomed to experience over and over the essential problems born of their founding cultures as well as the joys of their special occasions. If this is the case, it is a good thing that presidents are changed every five or ten years so that the issues and occasions feel fresh and inspiring" (p. 156).

The final memoir is written by current president, Mamdouh Shoukri, who titles his contribution "This is Our Time: Into a New Era of York University, 2007-14". The media attention focused on his ethnic background is identified as "unexpected", but clearly was a significant component of his early years at York. Shoukri recalls saying to media "I intend to be the president of the entire, diverse university, and I will be a person who will value every member of the York community – which group they come from is, with respect, truly irrelevant" (p.167). Shoukri identifies some struggles he has faced, but concludes by articulating a compelling vision for the University in the next fifty years.

The final chapter is titled "York's Crises Resolved: The Future is Secure". Focus is on an optimistic and confident future, with adequate money, brilliant students, strong alumni and a sustainable campus. The future looks bright indeed. 🍁