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Book Review / Compte rendu

Axtell, James (2016). *Wisdom's Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press. Pages: 417. Price 37.00 CDN (hardcover).

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Sherry in hand, new arm patches neatly sewed onto his tweed jacket, he chortles as he pens notes, surrounded by walls of books in his finely furnished study—this is how I imagine James Axtell writing his book, *Wisdom's Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University*. His history, which spans the evolution of medieval European institutions to modern American universities, is a joyfully written reinforcement of the greatness and adaptability of institutions of higher education. Axtell combats the pervasive "doomsday" narrative about the state of the university by demonstrating the successes and struggles of early universities. He writes,

> the university is now more than eight centuries old, but it hasn't shriveled into senescence. Instead of aging, it has in the last century gained new vigor and proliferated progeny not only in the United States but also around the globe. On that basis alone, the latest alarms and hand-wringing over its prospects seem unwarranted. (p. 363)

In his cerebral way, he tells readers to calm down—universities have flourished in more antagonistic settings than those experienced today.

Axtell structures his work into a series of seven chapters that follow the historical development of the university. If chapters are days, and Axtell our tour guide, he begins our adventure in the Middle Ages with an exploration of Western Europe's educational institutions. In little more than 40 pages we experience the barbaric and chaotic foundations of higher education. From the lack of modern day campuses, to the inaccessibility of books, to the bravado of student and teacher disputations, Axtell paints a vivid picture of early European university life.

Subsequently, Axtell shifts our focus to England and the rise of Oxford and Cambridge. While a somewhat jarring turn, this detour prepares us to sail across the Atlantic and witness the formation of the American colleges. The most memorable aspects of this chapter

encapsulate the intrigues between monarchs, the church, and the university along with the descriptions of student and teacher behaviours. If there is one thing to be garnered from chapter two, it is that privilege and wealth help a man achieve whatever academic end he desires.

Bearing this in mind, the remainder of our journey, barring a short jaunt to Germany in chapter five, resides in America. Chapters three, four, six and seven take the reader from the inception of American colleges, specifically Harvard, through time to the propagation of institutions designed to meet an evolving country's needs. In chapters three and four, Axtell emphasizes how American institutions emulated and differed from England's Oxbridge, and in the final two chapters he discusses how the fully-fledged, diverse institutions we know today came into being. Additionally, a substantial portion of chapter seven focuses on the relationship between government, business and education to explain how modern arrangements benefit all parties (including the public).

Finally, our journey to Germany in chapter five underscores how the German educational system impacted American teaching and learning. Germany's novel approach to education privileged a student's educational freedom and research above the British model's discussion and re-hashing of classic texts. German educated students redefined American universities by making lectures, seminars and labs common teaching methods (pp. 256-257). These, and other adaptations, along with the destruction of Europe during the world wars, established American colleges as preeminent in the world.

Overall, Axtell touches on several themes throughout *Wisdom's Workshop*: institutional structure, effectiveness of teaching and learning, functions of the university, financing, students and their behavior, and the library system. It is his focus on this last subject that particularly invokes the image of Axtell as a tweedy professor. He writes with such clarity and detail about the types, style, and availability of books, one can only imagine his affection for the written word.

One of the work's most compelling aspects is how Axtell connects modern discourse about the faults of the university with how universities developed such traits over time. In touching on the aforementioned themes, Axtell demonstrates how every institution since medieval times has experienced the same trials and tribulations. Students continue to be uninterested in their studies, good teaching remains a challenge, financing is still suboptimal, and student selection anything but exclusively merit based. There is nothing so wonderfully liberating as knowing these problems are not new.

Recognizing this, we may infer that the state of the academy is not as dire as commonly believed. In fact, are we not ecstatic that we no longer contend with students lobbing cannonballs down their dormitory hallways (p.132)? Or that it is uncommon (or unheard of) to be "expelled from the university on trumped-up charges, physically attacked (even in chapel), made drunk and jailed on election eve, or [to have] … fully earned degrees held up by procedural foot-dragging" (p. 61)? Perhaps "progress" is not a fallacy.

Overall, Axtell conveys that the American higher education system inspires incredible change— consider its impact on novel ways of thinking, new career opportunities, and social mobility. Indeed, Axtell does not intend his book to dwell on "all that troubles the elite and other universities' existence and tranquility" (p. xviii). And he expertly avoids just that. By focusing on institutional greatness, and by highlighting controversial subjects in anecdotes only, he successfully glosses over anything divisive.

Unfortunately, this may be the greatest fault of his work. Axtell seems so desperate for us to believe in the strength of the university that he fails to address many of the disparities the system propagates. Based on this work, one could easily believe that females, students of low socio-economic upbringing, African Americans, and other minorities were embraced or at least tolerated by the post-secondary education system. Yet, we know this is not true (see Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Compared to the number of pages devoted to the appreciation of libraries, these students play an inconsequential role. They serve only as short narratives or examples, such as chapter five's reference to women in Germany (pp. 251-253), or chapter seven's mention of non-white veterans' college choices (p. 323). Additionally, Native Americans, despite their importance, are never discussed. Even Axtell's analysis of poor student post-secondary access is fraught with inconsistencies—he talks about the meritocratic systems that arose to enable the "brightest" to attend elite universities, but fails to recognize the contravening policies designed to inhibit their enrollment or educational attainment.

Yet, I cannot fault Axtell for his lack of interest in berating an already castigated system, particularly as he makes what could be a dull, overly complex read into an engaging and thoughtful history of the American university. His colorful characterizations of students, teachers, presidents, and politicians help to draw the reader into his world. He jovially discusses intrigue and presidential idiosyncrasies, as if they were the manifestations of a naughty, but beloved, child. *Wisdom's Workshop* is a passionate defense of a cherished university system and a book I highly recommend.

Reference

Kirkness, V. & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and higher education: The four Rs – respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility. *Journal of American Indian Education*, *30*(3), 9-16.