

ROWLAND LORIMER
LETTER TO THE EDITOR.

Dear Hart

I am unable to provide you with a review essay of David Cameron's *Taking Stock: Canadian Studies in the Nineties*. As I noted to you by email, I wrote a piece for the *ACS Newsletter* and subsequently, wrote an essay for a special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies* on the implications of the report for interdisciplinary teaching. I thought I would write a "letter to the editor" to see if that would allow me to get some useful information across in a succinct manner. You can be the judge.

As you know, David Cameron was commissioned to undertake this report by the office of the Secretary of State (now Department of Canadian Heritage). This commissioning agent wanted to get information on the state of the field and whether a rationale might emerge that would persuade politicians to maintain funding programs. So Cameron wasn't really in a position to take a broad perspective critical of academe in general. Nor was he the person likely to be interested in taking such a stance.

The report itself is not impressive. Information was solicited but response rates were low and Cameron appears not to have spent a great deal of energy pursuing reluctant information providers. At the same time as he took an accountant's perspective, he lacked an accountant's thoroughness. If you asked David what he thinks he found, I suspect that he would say that he found some healthy programs in several universities, e.g., Trent, Carleton, maybe even McGill, maybe also Calgary and Edmonton. But I think he would keep the list short. On the other hand, he found many programs that carried on from year to year without much commitment from any but a few faculty and from seemingly little interest on the part of students.

Of course, as any sociologist will tell you, indeed any thinking person (the two should not be equated) there are symptoms and causes. Lack of commitment to Canadian studies in most Canadian universities

simply means that there are few or no rewards for it. This is not to say that a tremendous amount of work is not being carried out in Canadian history, literature, geography, sociology, communications, and so forth. As you well know, when Australian Canadianists visit Canada they tend to find themselves in disciplinary departments more than Canadian studies programs. In fact, Cameron made a fair amount of the fact that discipline-based Canadian studies had expanded enormously since the Symons report (1974).

Cameron also did a good job defining half of interdisciplinarity. I'll quote because it's right here on my hard drive. Interdisciplinarity, Cameron notes,

arise(s) out the desire to synthesize knowledge and understanding, to reassemble what has been treated as analytically distinct, to interrelate. Interdisciplinary work frequently aims at discovering coherence in an intellectual world fragmented by disciplinary specialization.... As such, university [*sic*] [I think he meant interdisciplinary] studies programs constitute an intellectually creative counterpoint to the disciplinary organization of academic life. Interdisciplinary *Canadian* studies programs, when they are operating effectively, exhibit these characteristics and find their conceptual justification in part in this reality.

There is another feature of these interdisciplinary programs that ought not to be lost sight of. They are more likely to have an "issue" or a "problem" focus than the traditional disciplines and, as such, their preoccupations frequently align themselves more readily with the effort the larger society is making to address certain practical problems. They can be, then, not simply a forum in which disciplines can converse with one another, but also, to some extent intermediary institutions between the university and the surrounding community.

... Why *Canadian* studies? ...

Canada, obviously, is alone in being the only territory or jurisdiction ... which has the status of a sovereign state, with all that that implies in the way of institutions, networks, functions and international understanding.... Canadian studies, then, provides a distinctive perspective from which to expand our understanding of the Canadian community—its culture, customs, laws and accomplishments. It holds the potential, not only of expanding our knowledge of Canada, but of generating new ways of understanding the Canadian experience, of developing indigenous theories and explanatory frameworks to account for the Canadian reality. (pp. 41–42)

He continues: "The choice is not between pure interdisciplinary inquiry, on the one hand, and some mongrel contraption on the other." And he notes that professional education is multidisciplinary, that the sciences are mostly interdisciplinary, that disciplines come and go, and, citing the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education, that many older disciplines arose out of administrative and bureaucratic convenience.

He also captures the two positions of most who engage in interdisciplinary Canadian studies. Some work is founded on an attempt to integrate existing knowledge of all kinds with the goal of creating a synthesis which has some relevance to Canadian concerns or realities. Other work begins with an attempt to address such concerns and realities and, in the attempt to do so, finds existing knowledge in one or more disciplines—or even in other area studies—that provides insight.

The half that he missed, as far as I am concerned, is interdisciplinary analysis. It's not all synthesis, it is analysis first and then synthesis, and the fact that Cameron did not recognize both sides of the equation is indicative of a basic flaw and this basic flaw led him to the wrong conclusions focusing on Canadian studies itself and not on universities and their response to Canadian studies.

So where exactly did this take our friend David? As I see it, he donned the garb of the Iron Maiden, Maggie Thatcher, and came up

with this lean and mean, cut and run "solution" for Canadian studies. Banish from existence underfunded programs, redefine those that are left as "centres of excellence" (he didn't use this rather tired term) and needle the Department of Canadian Heritage for money to make these centres even better. To quote him directly, "It is perfectly appropriate and in fact desirable that fundamental questions must be put." Those programs that are "minimal to the life of the institution" serving "a tiny cadre of students" should be axed. Much later in the report he says: "The consolidation of the country's formal Canadian studies enterprise into a network composed of a number of powerful interdisciplinary Canadian studies programs could be an appealing proposition if a government were prepared to assist the community in moving into a new stage of teaching and learning about Canada" (Cameron 168).

You can imagine that this stance did not please many of us who were not among Cameron's chosen few. Moreover, as I said in my *JCS* paper, I don't think these are fundamental questions at all. For me the fundamental question is: *In face of a continued low level of knowledge and commitment to the ideals of Canadian society by Canadian university students, why do Canadian universities not give high priority to making available, even promoting, a thorough-going and integrated knowledge of Canada?*

In the *JCS* paper I tried to make the case that Canadians (and much of the world) live in an American (in the US sense of the word) cosmological totality in which US contemporary and historical figures form a pantheon of gods representing a set of values which are as attractive as any pantheon in that they stand for an ideal world with a particular set of dynamics. The trouble is, as we all know, US realities are far from ideal, a fact that, thankfully, most Canadians understand. (Elaine Bernard once pointed out as we walked around Boston that the biggest buildings in US cities are insurance buildings. "This is a country where people live in fear." In Canada the biggest buildings are banks.) But what we Canadians seem unable to do is build a coherent and integrative mythology that is present and current throughout the land. We can't even convince about 45 to 50 per cent of Quebecers that they are way better off as part of Canada than independent—but that is

another story which you know more about than I. My sense of the reason that we can't create this cosmology is because US cosmology is a totality and because we are too close to the Americans we can't convince ourselves that we are fundamentally different. Anyway, we'll see what others make of the argument.

I guess that down there in Australia you'd like to know how the international programs came out. Not badly, but not terrifically either. Basically, in a surprisingly straightforward manner David said that it was a real pity that the within-Canada Canadian studies operation and the external-to-Canada operation weren't integrated. I support that and the early history of personal rivalry within the federal bureaucracy along with the empire-building ambitions of a few academics (along with the desire of some foreign Canadianists to sit on a wonderful set of privileges created for them by External) have not been overcome. As he points out, that's all pretty stupid, or at least, counter-productive. He recognizes the External's programs have paid off in international recognition and opts for their continuance. However, no report of any kind has much chance these days in budget-cutting Ottawa. I am sure it's the same where you are. Maybe when things get less tight the recommendations of the report will be there waiting.

So what does it all amount to? The report is disappointing. I have not seen or heard of anyone singing its praises. It is unimaginative and I took Cameron to task for not giving his assignment enough attention (he was involved advising governments on constitutional issues at the same time as he was carrying out the work on the report). Has it made any difference? Not any that is detectable. Luckily, university administrators don't read anything they don't have to (no time, I'm not really implying otherwise). But just to show you the difficulty of the situation, Simon Fraser's Canadian Studies program went through an external evaluation and was praised heartily. Basically, the reviewers said it was unconscionable that in view of what the program had accomplished and in view of student interest that the program was not granted even one full time tenure track position. The net result was that about \$8,000 in new money was allocated to the program to have department-appointees/tenure track faculty to teach rather than grad students.

In conclusion, my sense is that there is a rather profound incongruity between Canadian studies programs *per se* and universities as they are currently organised. (That's why so many are ill funded.) The only way around this lack of fit is to claim interdisciplinarity. But when it comes right down to it, interdisciplinarity to me is just plain good, problem-centred research. Of course, I left my "discipline" once my Ph.D. was granted so my view is not the common one. On the other hand, if Canadian studies programs try to create a better fit by specialising they cease being Canadian studies programs. When I was director of the SFU program I brought forward the Master of Publishing program (to the university) and considered trying to persuade the Steering Committee that we should evolve Canadian Studies into a focus on Canadian publishing. I didn't proceed with this option because, independent of my possible success in persuading others, it would have been tantamount to killing Canadian studies at SFU. Lately, we've been toying around with a "B.C. in Canada" emphasis. That might work.

I realise that much of what I have dwelt on might be more applicable to Australian studies in Australia as opposed to Canadian studies in Australia. But that is the nature of the debate here. I hope this is useful.

Rowly

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