

"Great Brain Robbery" a dangerous book

By Andre Picard

for Canadian University Press

Professors David Bercuson, Robert Bothwell and J. L. Granatstein would no doubt be surprised to see a review of **The Great Brain Robbery** by a student in a student newspaper. Given that they consider most students as an indistinguishable mass of blathering illiterates not worthy of a university education, they might find this enlightening.

The three Ivory Tower insiders might also be positively shocked to learn this commentary stretches well over 25 words, the copy is not beer-soaked and it's written by a rational human being who, along with his fellow students and bubbly-buddy professors, can hardly be credited with the destruction of the Canadian university system.

The Great Brain Robbery

Canada's Universities on The Road to Ruin

by David J. Bercuson (U of Calgary), Robert Bothwell (U of Toronto), and J. L. Granatstein (York University)
McClelland and Stewart, 160 pages

However tempting it may be to toss **The Great Brain Robbery** in the garbage and dismiss it as the poorly-researched, ill-argued, caustic diatribe that it is, the book is worthy of analysis for several reasons.

"The book is dangerous," says Jean Wright, Canadian Federation of Students researcher, "because it says a lot of things that people want to hear — without justifying them one bit." Buoyed by the names of three of Canada's top historians on the cover, the polemic presents a false air of authority and research. And it's doing brisk sales.

Donald Savage, Canadian Association of University of Teachers director, is blunt about his feelings on the book. "Frankly, I think it's unprofessional to release a book with so little research and justify it with the excuse that it's a polemic."

Students and professors from coast-to-coast are echoing these angry condemnations. So why the furor?

The esteemed academics, Granatstein, Bothwell and Bercuson have managed to insult almost everyone involved in the education system and have offered a hollow solution to please no one. And if that wasn't enough, their thesis is loaded with inflammatory language and unjustified, exaggerated claims not supported by any data.

The main premise of **The Great Brain Robbery** is Canadian universities passed through a utopian period in the 1940s and 50s and we must return to these golden times immediately if post-secondary institutions are to be saved from ruin.

Nice idea. The only hitch is Shangri-La university never existed, and never will under their flimsy dream vision.

The system which the three academics wish to revive was blatantly sexist and racist — shutting out women, natives and visible minorities and putting quotas on Jews and Japanese Canadians — not to mention primitive and ineffective from an academic view point.

"I was there," recalls Savage, a McGill history professor in the pre-expansion days. "I don't accept for one moment the premise of the book ... the false history and false nostalgia that they used as justification is absurd."

The authors bemoan the demise of squeaky clean (though mythical) Mr. Chips' with their cozy classrooms full of brilliant students. "Teachers could get away with murder. There was no accountability whatsoever," recalls Savage. "Look at the scholarship and research that professors were supposed to do — not much."

Yet the CAUT director's most vivid memories of the 50s are "regular and systematic attacks on professors by government, administrators and their colleagues."

This problem was overcome by granting tenure, something **The Great Brain Robbery** claims has been perverted into job security and allowed some academics to "use their podium as a pulpit to preach a particular dogma to susceptible young minds in their classes ... (thus) violating academic freedom."

Teachers' unions, it goes without saying, have promoted "rough communism", served as a shield for "incompetents" and metamorphosed scholars into "teaching drones." Bothwell, Granatstein and Bercuson imply they have miraculously escaped these evils, yet fail to mention the faculty unions they loath have allowed them to go from earning starvation wages to earning a decent living and have fought to retain sabbaticals so they and their colleagues can publish works, scholarly and otherwise.

But the contempt they have for modern-day scholarship, unions and sabbaticals is nothing compared to their attitude towards students.

The historians vividly describe the 1968 occupation of Sir George Williams (now Concordia University) computer centre by a mob of "militant blacks, white liberals, and socialist revolutionaries" and through an outstanding and mind-numbing leap of logic, explain that this "unjustified and criminal assault" by "student guerillas" has ultimately led to watered down entrance requirements, grade inflation and the "misguided notion" that students have rights.

This is reactionary rhetoric at its best, and makes a mockery of their accusations that student newspapers are "miniature Pravdas" controlled by student revolutionaries with "fevered minds". Not only is their analysis of the George Williams incident simplistic and extremely poorly researched, it conveniently fails to mention the students involved were jailed for

Granatstein, Bercuson and Bothwell even want teacher evaluations discontinued, neglecting that these opinions carry little weight and an ever-growing number of professors are using their classes' comments for self-improvement.

For a respected labor historian like David Bercuson to put his name on outlandish statements such as democracy leads to "the cancer of student revolt", "too much democracy" is anarchy, "salvation" from democracy is "a strong does of elitism" and democracy and excellence are diametrically opposed is a sad state of affairs, and hypocrisy of the highest order.

It's a wonder these sages can even face a class of barbarian undergraduates without rabidly frothing at the mouth. All the bright students have fled to the more cerebral pastures of Harvard, Yale and Princeton while "incompetent students, students who should never have gone to university, have nearly destroyed the system."

When they do face these lowly, susceptible plebians, they must be blinded by rage because they have overlooked a few obvious changes in the classroom since the golden era, such as the long overdue influx of women, minorities and the disabled, as well as a growing number of part-time students.

Let's give them the benefit of the doubt. But how can professionals researchers who decry sub-standard academic publishing overlook other major factors in enrolment increases, such as the huge increase in high school graduates and changes in the Canadian economy which brought technological change and the necessity of a university degree to secure career employment?

Unfortunately, the authors use their flawed analysis of enrolment to discuss university funding, a section which contains some of the most insightful comments in **The Great Brain Robbery**. Stating the obvious, they say "some major changes in the funding sector are necessary", enrolment-based funding is a flop, and university funding suffers greatly and unnecessarily from federal-provincial bickering on the subject. But again there are no well thought-out alternatives presented and an unforgivable lack of cold, hard facts to back up their statements.

The gloatingly hold up Yale and Harvard as examples of independent institutions which do not rely hand-to-mouth on government funding. But they disregard the Ivy League's five figure tuition fees and the fact that the bulk of American colleges are struggling. Many survive on such dubious forms of revenue as selling television rights for their all-star football teams and selling scientific discoveries to private industry.

The fact is, universities are grossly underfunded.

That is the most important factor the scholars should have addressed. It is fairly obvious that making universities even more elitist is not going to solve the underfunding problem, but create even more related difficulty. If these professors were looking for sweeping improvements in funding, they could have suggested closing up billions of dollars in corporate tax loopholes and turning over the monies to cash — starved institutes.

These professors call for tuition fees to be raised to \$2000. This further sets out the reality of their ill-presented elitism argument. It becomes increasingly clear throughout the book that they want the rich and refined to attend post-secondary institutes and are masking their belief behind a call for better standards and more financial autonomy.

Given tuition fees contribute only about 8 per cent of universities' budgets, the net result of raising them, even dramatically, would be negligible, and the real effect would be to lock out the poor and middle class students who aspire to higher education. And to expect governments to embrace the elitist system and grant full scholarships to the academically gifted, given that they are already eliminating grants and making loans near-impossible to secure, is ludicrous.

Any discussion of finances under the utopian model set out in **The Great Brain Robbery** is purely superfluous, however, as no speculative enrolment figures for Shangri-La University are given, and there is no data demonstrating how their proposed changes would bring about the perceived savings. And we need not even breach the idea of what would happen to the masses of young people who would be ineligible for these haughty scholarly palaces, uneducated and out-of-work because the authors have evidently not thought out their arguments to the point where these real issues arise.

Granatstein, Bothwell and Bercuson also take administrators to task for offering such programs as Canadian studies, Women's studies and native studies, which they label "shallow piecemeal and self-congratulatory navel-gazing." Again the vehemence of their attack is not logical nor supported by evidence. They fail to mention such programs are an amalgam of supposedly solid offerings of traditional faculties and cost

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serving in the social services, professoriates, law practices and even the Canadian senate — hardly the fate of most terrorists.

Worse yet, Bercuson, Bothwell and Granatstein give no other examples of student action in this country, peaceful or political. Caught in their time warp and hiding behind their word processors, the trio leaves readers with nothing but shallow innuendo and guilt by association as their blanket condemnation rolls on.

This attitude pervades their opinions of students as students, too. Time and time again we are told students are stupider than they were in the glory days of the 50s, but not one shred of evidence is used to back up these claims.

"A Student who graduates with a B average today would likely have received a C+ twenty year ago," they declare self-righteously, as if we are supposed to take their word for it.

A minor point they overlook is course requirements. What were once graduating requirements are not entrance requirements in some programs, says Donald Savage. "Universities are demanding evermore." The history lessons professor Savage taught graduate students in the 1950s are now basics for second year courses, for example.

"The notion that the last couple of decades has met an appreciable decline (in standards) is nonsense," he says.

More grossly exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims come in the domain of student influence on policy. The authors call for the removal of all students representation for senates, boards and committees because students "instinctively resist", making their work more difficult.

They don't credit students with having a lot of gray matter, but do give them a lot of credit for political power they simply do not have. One must label the belief five to ten per cent student input will sway administration decisions as sheer paranoia.