The Perils of Dalhousie History and Analogous Ventures

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The perils of a Dalhousie history based on its lives are not just theoretical. William Allen White's advice to historians of the lives of famous men was, "First, kill the widow!". Or, to extrapolate the principle, in the lifetime of the subject look out for the wife, or the husband, or indeed relations. I once did a biography of the president of U.B.C. 1944-62, Pictou County Nova Scotian, Dalhousie graduate, Larry MacKenzie. His wife was not at all sure she liked what I was doing, for there were secrets in Larry's 200 feet of papers. She was even less sure she liked me. One windy April day in Vancouver, she offered me a boat trip to her cottage on Bowyer Island, out in Howe Sound. She had a small 14 foot boat, with a massive motor. A fair lop was coming up the Strait of Georgia that day. She was a climber who had been through many adventures in the mountains and she feared nothing about the sea. She should have. I'd been in the Navy, and was slightly familiar with what the sea could do. As she drove that little boat with its huge outboard motor through those big waves, I gained the impression that she didn't care whether she or I were pitched overboard, or if the whole improbable contraption were to capsize in that cold water. I did not say a word; I just put my eye on where the life belts were. We dumped more and more spray over the bow. Finally she said, "I wonder if I should slow down?" I said, "I thought so twenty minutes ago."

Both she and her husband died before the biography came out in 1987. But the family hated the book. What happened was that there were too many truths; too much of their father's life, character and habits had come out. The book was not a work of denigration; it was portrait, warts and all, of a man I quite liked. The difficulty was discussed in *Times Literary Supplement* in 1969:

> The important thing is that each life is part of a tissue of confidences which extends to many lives, and it is only when all those lives have ceased that some degree of ethical obligation

> to maintain confidence finally vanishes. The biographer has at any rate an obligation to consider the motives which caused his subject to keep something quiet and to give some measure of respect to those motives which regard others.[1]

This is a fey, but not irrelevant introduction to a big subject: the history of Dalhousie University. The title of volume 1 and volume 2 is *The Lives of Dalhousie University*. For lives is what it is at its heart: buildings, courses, examinations, committees, faculties, Senate, Board of Governors, they and their records all matter; sometimes they matter very much; but it's what human beings, the students, professors, administrators do with those things, how they build the buildings, how they teach the courses, how they interact with each other that represents working lives, and thus the history of the university.

The second volume is particularly awkward, for it goes from 1925 to 1980. None of the other modern university histories go so far; MacMaster's goes to 1957, Queen's to 1961, Mount Allison's to 1963, McGill's to 1971. When W.A. MacKay, Dalhousie's president from 1980 to 1986, asked me if I could bring the Dalhousie history down to 1980, the end of the Henry Hicks' presidency, I was appalled and intrigued. If I liked the neatness of it, I disliked almost everything else. But the more I thought about it, the more inevitable 1980 appeared to be. But 1980 also meant risks, with reputations, tempers, memoirs, in widows, children, relations, the whole festoon of the intertwined past, past grievances, past happinesses, that a person carries with them. It was a particular concern to me because I don't like writing abstractly about issues without getting at the people who made the issue in the first place. In short, going to 1980 meant dealing with personalities and lives very much into the present.

I thought the Dalhousie history would require only three, at most four years of work, and with ingenuity and ruthlessness with material, only one volume. I believed the fashion of doing university histories in two volumes represented failure on the part of the author to tailor his research and contain his loquacity. The Dalhousie history would be done in one volume. Alas for such pride! It was soon enough to be humbled. I had not written the first chapter of volume 1 before I knew that a single volume would never do it. In the end it has taken not one volume and four years, but two volumes and eleven years. So much for academic prescience!

There has been only one advantage of that long stretch of research and writing: some of the more sensitive souls in the Dalhousie history have since died. Henry Hicks, Dalhousie's president 1963 to 1980, was not a sensitive soul but he too died, in 1990 in a car crash. His new and third wife was driving. I had expected to have him available as I developed the narrative into the 1960s and 1970s. Mercifully I had the luck to schedule three long interviews with him in 1988. There were however plenty of others who are alive and vigorous and who

may not like what they read. The truth hurts, especially when it's in print and in a medium that's not exactly ephemeral. Newspaper or magazine articles come and go; books may get old and dusty but they are readily available, and they last a long time.

What ought posterity to know? What should the historian tell? The standards are changing all the time, and they vary from person to person. In the 1990s the answers to such questions are becoming no easier, for posterity seems to want to know anything and everything, from wherever and whomever one may find it. No one here needs reminding of the breached confidences in the various biographies of Diana, Princess of Wales. She did a fair bit of that herself. But aside from such notorieties, what is one to tell, say, of Henry Hicks? Henry Hicks left lots of papers, talked freely about himself and many other things. Costive he was not. So his personality and style in letters, speeches and photographs is fairly accessible. But there are many others whose historical instincts are highly conservative. They want to protect the reader, hide the roughness, luridness, of some of the past. They have an instinct to bowdlerize, to protect reputations and memories. History becomes for them a varnish; you may bring out the odd interesting knot or show the grain, but you must also glue down the dangerous splinters.

Let me illustrate. There is a history of the Chemistry department written by a respected and well-liked colleague of mine, now dead. It is a worthy and solid piece of work. But the instinct to cover up uncomfortable facts was strong with him; one must not offend wives, widows or children if one can avoid it. He avoided it, in his account of Professor Carl Coffin. Coffin was an exceptionally able research professor of Chemistry. He also had what Henry Fielding used to call an amiable weakness: he liked to drink. When he was drunk he was distinctly unamiable, as his wife had occasion to know. One night in 1948 working in his laboratory at Dalhousie, he got down a bottle of what he thought was ethyl alcohol and mixed himself a fairly stiff drink. Unfortunately the alcohol was methyl, not ethyl. A day or two later in the Victoria General he was blind. In the history of the Chemistry department it is set down that Professor Coffin went blind from an accident in the laboratory. That suggests something very different, perhaps a flask of sulfuric acid exploding. In the Dalhousie history I record as it was. An historian friend said to me, "How can you do this? What of Coffin's family? Why did they have to see this in print about their father?" It is a relevant and sensitive question. I think the motto of the historians has to approach that of St. Francis Xavier, *Quaecumque Vera*, the truth no matter what. Not all historians would agree; some would say, not all the truth, not all the time. I lean to von Ranke, *Geschichte wie es eigentlich gewesen war*, as it really was. If you can do it. One story I had to suppress as part of an agreement with Dalhousie. It was a legal point, and I saw no decent way out. But other than that, and other than suppressions imposed by others who

have told me things in strict confidence, I aim to tell the truth, and I think every historian should. Dean X at Dalhousie wrote that Dean Y was the meanest and dirtiest in-fighter he'd ever met. The Dean X who wrote those words is dead; the Dean Y of whom he wrote them is not. Do I quote them? I think I ought to. The Dean Y of whom it was said has many fine things to his credit; so does Dean X; but Dean X's opinion is not irrelevant. The remark is a comment on both deans.

It is surprising to me that often older people want to cover up their past feuds, past struggles; it's as if in the serenity of old age one does not find comfortable the *Sturm und Drang* of earlier years. Even Goethe, who virtually invented that movement, felt like correcting his past.

The great bulk of the past can never be told because it no longer exists, gone like last month's daily living, and usually not even a wrack of memory left behind. Historians have to glean the bits of evidence, on paper or in people's fading memories. The paper trail is tricky enough and not getting better. Bell's telephone of 1876 was a marvelous invention, but 120 years of it have left historians longing for those pale yellow telegrams that often told us so much. Few of us keep telephone logs the way the German Foreign Office did in the 1930s. Documentation there is, but with the telephone dealing with so much and so directly, papers are more formal and much thicker. Letter-writing is still found, but as art it is declining and great letters turn up less frequently. Carleton Stanley, Dalhousie's President 1931-1945, was an excellent letter-writer, and his correspondents comprehended many intellectuals, especially left-wing ones, in Canada, Oxford and the London School of Economics. Stanley's letters are vivid, unrestrained, forthright, written in a terse, condensed prose that often comes from a mind grounded in Latin and Greek. But Stanley's type is getting more rare. His successor was Presbyterian and prosy, a United Church minister, A.E. Kerr, whose faceless unlovely prose is devoid of life. Not for A.E. Kerr Emerson's marvelous dictum, "Words, when cut, should bleed." Kerr's words were white, bleached by his javel-water mind. Despite that malice I have tried to be fair to Kerr, trying to understand his background (Louisbourg), what were his strengths and limitations. Although I never liked him, it seems to me the historian has to put aside resentments. Especially must historians avoid editorializing. Sit down before the facts like a little child; that was the advice of a great biologist, Thomas Huxley. Sit down also before personalities, with the aim of doing justice to them before the bar of history. I like to let the evidence speak for itself.

What are the best sources? It partly depends on what you are looking for. Of course one has to begin with the minutes of the Board of Governors, the Senate, and preferably those of the several faculties. They're important, often vital, provided one realizes that they can be fairly clumsy and crude ways to get at what really went on. They are heavily abbreviated, and usually they are severely

bowdlerized. Frank records of what really went on at a meeting are as revealing as they are rare. When in September, 1944, a small but powerful group of the Board of Governors decided to try to push President Carleton Stanley into resignation, they encountered a Tartar. He was not resigning. He believed he could fight the Board and win. So he arranged to have the Board Minutes as comprehensive as possible; he got his devoted and talented secretary, Lola Henry, to take down what happened shorthand. The result is a revelation. It's also a lesson in not trusting minutes too far.

The most useful source for my purpose was the Presidents' Office correspondence. It's a curious story. Prior to the arrival of President A.S. MacKenzie in 1911, Dalhousie's presidential records were, so Lola Henry used to say, on the starched cuffs of President Forrest's shirts. Dalhousie acquired a typewriter about 1907, but I've seen no evidence of carbon paper until after 1911. President MacKenzie really began the records of the President's Office. Fifty years later, in 1963, Henry Hicks became President and had the perspicacity to ask Lola Henry to sort out the presidential records since 1911. They are in the Dalhousie Archives in 43 fat boxes. Henry Hicks' own records of his presidency, 1963-80, are in 34 equally fat boxes. That's one measure of the changes of this presidency.

If evidence determines what the conscientious historian can do, the lack of it determines what they can't do. The great weakness in the Dalhousie history is that it neglects, sometimes grossly, the ordinary lives of professors, students, administrators, caretakers. What a student made in History 1200 (Canadian History) may be a matter of record, but except for the student concerned, and for the statistics, it cannot be very useful in a book about Dalhousie's thousands of past lives. The excellent teacher, the brilliant researcher, the Rhodes Scholar student may get mentioned; but it is symptomatic of the nature of history that Professor Ernest Guptill of Physics gets notice not so much by his teaching or his research (he was excellent at both), but because he died tragically in a boat accident off Point Pleasant Park one cold March day in 1976. There are other professors less worthy, and some not worthy at all, who get space because they are mavericks, and who put the university to trouble and inconvenience to cope with them. The same with certain students. It recalls the Chinese curse: may you have an interesting history! When one reflects that they are good students, good professors, conscientious administrators, who are not in the book, or there because of some extraneous vicissitude quite unrelated to their talents, it is troubling. Yet there is no answer for it; it lies in the nature of the human animal and the way we remember things. If you have ever written a diary, you will know that routines pursued and written up conscientiously can make appalling reading. When I was in England at school, 1933-34, my father suggested I keep a diary. I did. It may be an early example of a woeful incapacity to think and write, but whatever that diary my have portended, most of it is unreadable. It's

unreadable for its routines, the opposite of the way we remember things, which is the striking, the odd, the strange, the brilliant. So routine, the small, insignificant daily pattern of our lives, is not remembered and probably cannot be. Gray's *Elegy* puts it another way, about the unknown of this world.

> Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
> Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
> Along the cool sequestered vale of life
> They kept the noiseless tenor of their way/

Another element missing in the Dalhousie history is the research that has brought things to light since page proofs were done and the index put to bed. For Dalhousie Vol. 2, that was at the end of March, 1997. I went skiing at Banff to celebrate. On the way back I stopped in Ottawa for a few days' work on something that had nothing to do with Dalhousie. The University of Toronto Press had asked me to write the introduction for a new edition of Donald Creighton's famous biography of Sir. John A. Macdonald. That introduction required a look at the Donald Creighton Papers that he had deposited in the National Archives. Creighton's *Macdonald* was published in two volumes in 1952 and 1955, so I was looking for papers that would elucidate the Creighton of the 1950s. I was surprised to discover in the Creighton Papers letters from George Wilson, Dalhousie's Dean of Arts and Science 1945-1955, letters about his experience working with President A.E. Kerr. Something of this I knew already, for I'd come to Dalhousie in 1951 to teach History and had been close to Wilson. But there was no documentation; Wilson's huge correspondence disappeared after his death. Now I had documentation in spades. Sadly it was too late to get it into a book. I give some of it here.

A.E. Kerr was a decent, narrow, small-town Presbyterian/United Church minister. As a student he spent two years at Dalhousie, a year in the First World War, and an affiliated year at Pine Hill. He got his Dalhousie B.A. in 1920. He came back to Pine Hill as its Principal in 1939. Dalhousie, after firing President Carleton Stanley in March, 1945, needed a new president and soon. Universities that fire their presidents cannot escape a certain reputation for it; that A.E. Kerr was appointed in August, 1945 is suggestive of a certain desperation. Dalhousie especially needed a president whose rectitude and integrity were unassailable. Thus A.E. Kerr; as Dr. C.B. Weld put it, "a clergyman wouldn't be a liar."[2]

Dalhousie was a very big place in 1945 compared to Pine Hill, with something like thirteen times the number of students and many more to come soon. Kerr had a lot to learn and at first realized it. He had the good sense to lean on Dean Wilson, and they spent much time together. In 1948 Wilson introduced Kerr to the history of Paris by spending three or four days walking with him. But by 1949 Kerr seems to have felt he had done his apprenticeship

and began to strike off on his own, then, too, Wilson had become quite disillusioned. He wrote Donald Creighton:

> Very much between ourselves I do not think very highly of our little president. He knows nothing cares nothing about scholarship. To advertise and to get more students is his idea of how to run a university. For scholarship or for excellence he cares not a whit.[3]

Kerr asked one candidate in Arts and Science if he went to church. When the candidate said he didn't, that finished him. Thus, said Wilson, we could never have a Carlyle or Goethe on Dalhousie staff! Moreover, Wilson added a year later, the new Arts and Administration building, big as a barn, represented in its cost something like twenty professors. With the money it cost we could have made Dalhousie into a first class college. "It is impossible to sell the idea of Quality to those who run the place. The Board of Governors never saw any such vision. Worse still I have to work with a President who is nearly (not quite) as ignorant as they are."[4] A month later Wilson was fed up; it had been a terrible winter, and his relations with the President were getting worse:

> The fact is (very much between ourselves) that I am coming to detest my president. How much longer we are likely to work together I do not know. You may think that it is odd that I should dislike him--but my dislike is mild compared to a majority of the faculty When I say majority I do not mean that anybody likes him. Nobody does...the faculty club had to get off the College grounds because they insisted on drinking beer. I waste hours on the subject. All this from a little runt who did two years (& poor ones at that) of work for his B.A....Faugh! I am sick of him and his ways. The morale of the place is dreadful.[5]

One amusing example of Kerr's ways Wilson regaled with some relish to Creighton. Dr. Murray was Assistant Professor of Anatomy, and got a request to go down to New York to be interviewed for a post there. Kerr heard about it and had Murray in and told him Dalhousie was making him an Associate Professor. Murray went to New York and accepted the American offer. When he got back, Kerr heard about it. He wrote and told Dr. Murray he had just been demoted back to Assistant Professor. Murray went around the campus telling everyone how he had been an Associate Professor for nine days!

All this is raw history of course, hot from the Creighton Papers. It is good stuff, though, and pity it's not in the Dalhousie history. But who would have

thought of looking in Donald Creighton's papers for the history of Dalhousie? Lots of historical research is developed out of sheer chance.

Often the most interesting form of evidence is interviews. There are of course all kinds and conditions. In the Dalhousie history I have used interviews as a designation for coffee conversations, formal interviews over lunch or dinner, just plain talk on the street or gossip in the Faculty Club. That I have never used a tape recorder for this purpose means enormous flexibility, but it may also be a comment on me. Perhaps I got off to a bad start, interviewing for the biography of Larry MacKenzie; most of my subjects would not talk to a tape recorder; those who would accept it said that there were certain things they would not tell me if it were running. So I got into bad habits; making short notes and writing it up as soon as possible afterward. The same technique, and for the same reason, was used by James King is writing a new biography of Margaret Lawrence. I was glad to discover that I was not alone in this wickedness for I was developing a conscience about it.

I like to talk to people over lunch or dinner, with a bottle of wine or beers not far distant. My main caution on this point would be this. By all means give your interviewee as much wine or beer as he or she pleases; but I would earnestly suggest that for you, the interviewer, the beginning of danger lies somewhere in the middle of the third glass of wine. For you must, unless you be a monster of total recall, set the interview out on paper as soon as possible after concluding it. A few scribbled notes on the back of an envelope are exceedingly helpful. If that does not sound very scientific, it isn't; on the other hand you will get confidences that you can get in no other way. Tape recorders are commonplace, but there will be inevitably, I think, real hesitation with that machine. It is never as neutral nor as noiseless as it seems.

But with notes there are problems too. I recall vividly interviewing Donald J. Morrison, the nephew of J. McGregor Stewart, who was Chairman of the Dalhousie Board of Governors from 1937 to 1943 and the major power on it until he died in 1955. I wanted to know about Morrison's formidable uncle. In April, 1990 we had amiable conversation for about an hour and a half, a good limit in my experience. I took notes, and translated them immediately afterward into a report. I was pleased with it. I sent the report to Donald Morrison for a check. He was not happy; "appalled" is too strong but it approached his state of mind. I was taken aback. Usually my reports of interviews back to the interviewee were accepted or altered with only minor modifications. I invited Mr. Morrison to correct freely. He didn't. Instead he sent me a ten-page bowdlerized essay on his uncle that he had now felt constrained to write.

What happened was his regret about his frankness. As he put it (September 29, 1990) "I'm afraid the 'colour' I added was more than I intended you to put into 'print'..." Moreover he wanted to register more adulation of his uncle than he had seen fit to offer in the interview. Mr. Morrison is now dead; in any case I

did not use much of what he had to say, but it was an instructive experience.

Thus I come back to this most difficult point of all; what is to be confidential? Philip Ziegler, the well known British biographer, said you ought to leave nothing out that *has* to go in, but nothing ought to go in merely for shock or titillation. That's a start . What must go forth into the world? And what ought to be private? The standards are shifting of course. We tolerate much more now than we did. Older people are much more jealous of their privacy than we probably would be.

But even younger ones can be remarkably prickly about their parents and relations, dead or alive. A prospect of something appearing in cold permanent print seems to exacerbate the brutality of whatever truth may reside there. One Dalhousie alumnus waxed very angry and threatened a lawsuit over something I had written in draft in Volume 2 about his dead father. The lawyer claimed that what I had written was untrue. The defence against a suit for civil libel is, as most of you know, that what was published was true. I had ample evidence, most of it verbal, some of it documentary, that what I had drafted was correct. It was about the ownership of a gift, one way or the other. After a cursory search for the origins of it, the University had concluded in 1991 that the gift belonged to the individual concerned. I had not been consulted. Thus the lawyer's anger had some reason in it, for it appeared to him as if the University, through its history and historian, was trying to take back in 1996 what it had already conceded in 1991. Whatever evidence I had been able to marshall did not really matter, not any more. Truth may not always win and it's upsetting when it doesn't.

Finally, what's wrong with this history of Dalhousie? At least two things are wrong with it. For one, too little analysis. From what sort of backgrounds and family did Dalhousie students come? Whither did they go? What work did they do? What happened to them? There are some pages of statistics, mostly about enrolment, but these statistics will probably be insufficient for exacting scholars. The history of Dalhousie mentions these questions of course, but mainly in passing. Such issues require a different kind of book, different set of mind, other ranges of research than I have been able to provide. There is a good article on this aspect of Dalhousie history by Paul Axelrod, "Moulding the Middle Class: Student Life at Dalhousie University in the 1930s," Autumn 1985 issue of *Acadiensis*. I found it extremely useful.

This leads to the second weakness of the Dalhousie history; the gearing of volume 2. How was one to move smoothly from 1960 to 1980? The basis of the metaphor is this: in 1959-60 Dalhousie's total enrolment was 1825 students, full-time, part-time, medical school, law school, dentistry, Arts & Science, everything. A decade later it was 5633. By 1979-80 it was 8864. That's an increase of 450%, really formidable. It was especially difficult in the 1960s when in ten years Dalhousie enrolment went up by 300%. All Canadian universities

had big increases in those years; Dalhousie's was bigger than most.

Those increases in student enrolment posed huge problems for Dalhousie; accommodations and professors just for a start, but they also strained, warped, in some cases broke down, existing infrastructures, committees, systems of working, attitudes of mind. Indeed, the holistic sense of belonging to one institution, even with its several faculties, a sense still real in the 1950s when enrolment was around 1600, was gone by the mid-1970s. What replaced the Dalhousie of the 1950s was a different university, carrying the same name, with some of the old traditions lingering, but with many new rules, systems, and manners to live by. Some of the changes were startling, in curriculum not least, suggested by student restlessness of the late 1960s. Even more dramatic changes came in the working of Shireff Hall, really engineered by the young women themselves, emboldened and made free by the pill. Also evident was a more confrontational style of decision-making, made inevitable by the advent of labour unions, especially the Dalhousie Faculty Association, and to a lesser degree the Dalhousie Staff Association. The Dalhousie history across this time, 1960 to 1980, finds it difficult to catch its breath: the busyness of new buildings, new staff, new assumptions, new morals, new confrontations, and amid it all the struggle of the President, Senate and the Faculties to control and manage this exponentially expanding world.

How will the next history of Dalhousie be written? There is one source of relief to me, and doubtless to you: it won't be written by this author. Is the very title, The *Lives of Dalhousie University*, already anachronistic? Perhaps not. The late John Willis, probably the greatest law writer in Canada, used to urge writers of law, of history, not to bother too much with books of biography, history, treatises of law, what you might well have thought germane to their *métier*. No, Willis said, read poetry, novels, plays, anything that "feeds your imagination... that makes you see into the life of things."[6] He was reiterating the description of Edward Thring (1821-1877) about teaching: the communication by the living, of the living, to the living.

The future author may find refuge and occasionally charm in the *Dalhousie Gazette*, the student newspaper that read from its beginning in 1869 to 1980. It is sometimes excellent, not infrequently awful, and by no means always at one with its student constituency. But one can often find delights in it, as with "City after Rain," February, 1946:

Hushed lied the city
After the rain.
Blurred lights slide down the wet streets...
Up from the harbour.
Gently it blows the lights...

So not do I.

ENDNOTES

1. *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1969.
2. Interview , Dr. C.B. and Kathy Weld, 15 January 1988.
3. G.E. Wilson to Creighton, 15 February 1951, D.G. Creighton Papers, vol. 2, National Archives of Canada.
4. *Ibid.*, Wilson to Creighton, 25 February 1951.
5. *Ibid.*, Wilson to Creighton, 30 March 1951.
6. Quoted by R.C.B. Risk, "John Willis--a tribute," in *Dalhousie Law Journal*, vol. 9, no.3 (December 1986), p. 549

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