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Peter J. Bowler

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EDUCATION

Editors' Note: In this issue Prof Bowler shares with us some of the problems involved in establishing a course on the history of Canadian science and technology. We welcome brief articles on this and attendant problems. As an aid to generating further discussion, we have added a questionnaire to this issue. If you can provide us with any information on courses in Canada, we will greatly appreciate it.

Starting a University Course in the History of Canadian Science and Technology

Peter J. Bowler, University of Winnipeg

I have just started teaching a new second-year undergraduate course at the University of Winnipeg entitled "Science and Technology in Canadian History." It was encouraging that the Department of History was willing to introduce such a course on an experimental basis, but problems arose that may be of interest to others in the field.

Even at the planning stage, a few members of faculty doubted that Canadian science was worth this much attention, or that it could be distinguished from the general context of North American science. The trouble is that everyone sees science as an international activity to be judged by international standards. One has to point out that on a world-wide scale all Canadian history is trivial; we study it because it represents the heritage of our own country. It is true that especially in the pure sciences the results may not appear to have any uniquely Canadian character, but even here the context in which work was done (funding, etc.) is dictated by the peculiarities of the Canadian situation.

Unfortunately these suspicions may have received encouragement from the fact that initial enrolment in the course was low--indeed at one time it looked as though it would not be able to run. In part this may have been due to lack of publicity, but the reaction of students suggests that there are several problems that will have to be overcome to get the field established.

The University of Winnipeg offers a survey History of Science course which has large enrolments because it satisfies the arts students' science requirement. The new Canadian course does not satisfy this requirement, but it was hoped that some students majoring in Canadian history would still think it worthwhile. Only a very small number were willing to give it a try, and of these one backed out after the first class saying she "didn't think there was going to be any science in it." (Apparently she thought it would be a standard economic history course). Now I have deliberately set up the course so that it involves a minimum of technicalities. The students' response suggests that, whatever one's efforts in this direction, there will be difficulty in persuading arts students that a history of science course will not go over their heads.

The survey History of Science course also attracts a number of science students, for whom it satisfies the arts requirement.

I had thought that it would be comparatively easy to persuade some of these that a study of Canadian science would be of greater relevance to their careers and hence would be a better way of satisfying the requirement. Again, there were few converts, and those who did opt for the new course were not exactly wild with enthusiasm. One problem here was that with little secondary reading material available, students will inevitably be thrown more on their own resources than is usual at this level. For science students, this merely compounds the difficulty they experience in producing written work anyway. Apart from this there may have been a general reluctance to satisfy the requirement with an experimental course instead of an old favourite, and perhaps in future years we can hope for better enrolments. But clearly the establishment of such courses is not going to be an easy task, and perhaps we should not over-estimate the potential of our field in the purely academic sphere.

AT THE MEETINGS

Archival Meeting at the National Research Council in Ottawa

Sandra Guillaume
Archivist, Ontario Multicultural History Society

Through the courtesy of Dr A. W. Tickner and the NRC, another meeting in what appears to be a continuing series relating to the history of science in Canada was held on September 16, 1977. A total of 33 persons registered for what was billed in advance as a session on scientific archives. Chaired by Dr A. Davidson Dunton of Carleton University, the panel consisted of Norman R. Ball (Public Archives), Dr C.E.S. Franks (Queen's University), Dr Jean-Claude Guedon (Universite de Montreal), Sandra Guillaume (Ontario Multicultural History Archives), and Don Thomson (author of Men and Meridians).

Thomson made a brief statement about his own researches noting the importance of archival sources as a research base. He referred to the substantial emphasis given to archives by the Symons Report. In his opinion the history of science and the archival sources on which it is based are really part of the Canadian experience and should be better conveyed via publications, etc., to the Canadian people. He envisaged an emphasis particularly on high school programmes to acquaint young people with Canadian scientific and technological achievements.

Ball spoke particularly from the point of view of the Public Archives of Canada. Since the appointment of a specialist in the field of history of science, obviously all the programmes have made significant advances. There has been considerable increase in acquisitions but there is a problem in achieving the delicate balance between acquisitions and service. Increased acquisitions lead to increased research and since many researchers come to Norman from 'straight history' and other such areas, he frequently has to give extra guidance, which in turn removed him from the acquisitions sphere.

Guillaume, formerly of both McGill and University of Toronto