

Interview: Dr. Northrop Frye

by John Plaskett

Vic Report 7.2 (1978): 3-6.

The role of Chancellor is, at best, an ill-defined role. Could you outline what you see that role as being?

Well, I'm not sure. Victoria changed over from the University of Toronto scheme sometime in the 30s. Walter Brown was the executive officer before that, and there was no President. It was Brown who changed the [Victoria College] Act and brought in Brigadier Spencer as the first Chancellor, while he became Vice-Chancellor and President. Then we had Lester Pearson and Louis Breithaupt. And then the office lapsed for fifteen or twenty years.

So there really isn't a great deal of precedent, but I would assume that the Chancellor's function at Vic is roughly the same as that of the Chancellor of the University of Toronto—that is, to preside over Convocations, to be an ex-officio member of committees, and just be (if he's in residence, at any rate) an active participator in the College's business.

Why was the office allowed to lapse for so long? Or, why do you think Vic saw this as an appropriate time to install a new Chancellor?

I think that in the past it was not very functional because there was only one Convocation to preside over, but in the last few years the University of Toronto has been drifting into a more monolithic structure. It seems that more and more people are forgetting that the Faculty of Arts at Toronto is a federation of autonomous universities. To have a Chancellor figure in one of the federated colleges is perhaps a way of counteracting this. Otherwise, people will get the notion that Victoria, Trinity and Emmanuel are simply residences—or appendages—of the University

Of the past Chancellors, who was the most memorable?

Oh, Pearson, I suppose.

Was he very active in that role?

No, he wasn't terribly active. Of course, he was busy running Canada. He was rather preoccupied.

Do you think that your appointment, particularly because your name carries a lot of weight, might have been a tactic to prevent the University from pushing Vic around?

Yes, or even more . . . from forgetting that the College exists, that the College is a university in its own right with the power, by agreement of Charter, to confer its own degrees. Some of the people at Victoria—the President and the Chairman of the Board, and so on—were rather shocked to discover that a lot of people, even on the governing council, didn't realize the federation basis for the structure of the University of Toronto.

Do you think that the principle of federation has affected the life of the individual colleges?

Oh, yes. Federation has made the colleges much more than simply residences. A college has to be a teaching unit, and it has to have its own power of appointment if it's to be a genuine college. Other places, like Harvard and Yale, have spent extraordinary amounts of money trying to build up a college system, and they have always had to struggle against the strong drift back to centralization which every bureaucracy likes. For a university, you can't operate in that centralized, bureaucratic way. You have to keep decentralizing things.

You've taught at Harvard, Columbia, Princeton and Yale. What do you see as the biggest difference between those particular Ivy League universities and the U of T?

Up to about fifteen years ago, I'd have said that Toronto has two things that made it just about as good

a place for undergraduate training as you could get. One was the federation system, and the other was the Honour course. We've destroyed the Honour course out of hysteria, and now we're settling into a drift against the federation system.

Then you would like to see the Honour course reinstated?

Well, *something* has to be reinstated. That's what the Kelly Report says, and they've studied the matter very closely. It's possible that the old Honour course did require more maturity from the undergraduate than the undergraduate possessed. I'm not averse to seeing greater flexibility in a restructured program, but that there has to be some kind of structured program is beyond question. I think the first people to say so are the students.

When do you think Vic was at its best?

Oh, undoubtedly when I was an undergraduate. That is, when I was an undergraduate, the College was small enough—eight or nine hundred students—with a high concentration in the residences. At that time 1929–33, a great many people came to Toronto from small towns in western Ontario. There was no university in Guelph or Waterloo, no McMaster University in Hamilton, so you got a large core of people in the residences, and that gave a very strong community feeling. I knew everybody in my graduating year, and I've been rather disconcerted to see how students have lost the sense of community—in knowing each other and in being aware of themselves as a body of people.

What do you think accounts for that?

Greater numbers and the fact that the U. of T. has become a metropolitan university; more and more students live in Toronto and simply commute to the College. They don't get much of a sense of the university community.

If the College was at its best when you were an undergraduate, do you think there is any way in which we go back to a similar time?

We can keep fighting for the decentralizing of the student body. I doubt that we can ever get back to a number like eight or nine hundred—I don't think that's economically feasible. But it is possible to do something with a number like 1500. It's partly a matter of giving students a home, a sense of belonging, rather than simply that of a milling mob that drifts from one lecture room to another.

What do you think would happen if the individual colleges lost their identities?

The University of Toronto would become simply a middle Western cultural packaging-plant. It would become one of those big, shapeless universities which you find in the American Middle West.

You've taught and lectured at universities all over the world, and I'm sure you've been approached by many to go on staff.

Yes.

Why have you stayed here?

I don't quite know. There are almost as many answers to that question as there were offers. By that I mean, I have been involved in some very close and sometimes agonizing decisions. One thing is that Victoria and the University of Toronto have always been very good to me, and they usually made it clear that I would have very little to lose if I stayed here. Then, I feel very strong ties to Victoria, to Toronto and to Canada.

You first came to Toronto from New Brunswick when you were seventeen. Can you tell me a bit about that?

When I got through high school I had the highest standing in English. That gave me a scholarship to attend the local business college, and that gave me a training in shorthand and typing. I found that, partly because of my playing the piano, I was fairly good at the typewriter. In those days, the Underwood typewriter company used to organize typewriting contests (in Toronto) in order to demonstrate that its model was the fastest. I got involved in one of those.

At the same time you became an undergraduate at Vic. Who were some of the people who were meaningful to you as a young student?

Well, of course, our year is a very homogeneous one. A lot of us stayed on living in Toronto and we still have reunions. I'm going to be at a reunion party in a few days of which the hostess is Pauline McGibbon; she's a classmate of mine.

The sense of belonging was so strong that you did get to know people in the same course, or in similar sources in the other colleges. Bora Laskin was another classmate of mine, although not a Victoria man. In my year I made a great many life-long friends. When I was seventeen, in the fall of 1929, we were shoved into Frosh House on Charles Street; when I was installed as Chancellor, seven people from the house turned up ... and that's after nearly fifty years.

In your Installation Address, you said, "A great tradition is not a dead weight from the past, like a chain tied to a ghost, but a continuous source of energy." How, as Chancellor, do you envision maintaining that tradition?

I don't know if one man can maintain a tradition, but I am aware of it and I can remind other people of it. I can talk about the continuity that there has been through the college.

There was a rather remarkable series of lectures last spring: The Sesquicentennial Lectures. Margaret Prang and John Webster Grant talked about the continuity of that liberal, non-conformist tradition in Victoria, and I've been very much aware of that. It's not only Victoria people who are ware of it; that recent CBC documentary on Hart Massey obviously was too.

After graduating from Vic, you attended Emmanuel. You were ordained and had a mission field one summer in Saskatchewan. Was the latter a good time for you, or was it difficult?

It was difficult for me because I was a city boy and I'd never been on a horse before. I didn't know farmers and ranchers, so the Westerners were a new breed of people for me. In retrospect, it was an extraordinary experience: the people were just wonderful to me. The physical life, the fact that I had to live from week to week in different farm houses, sharing the facilities with the hired hands, a whole new world of bugs—these were some of the very surface things that preoccupied me at the time. But when I look back on it, I just think it was an experience I wouldn't have done without.

Did that experience have anything to do with your decision to pursue the study of university teaching?

Well, gradually it had been growing on me. By the time I took that mission field I already knew that I wanted a university career.

How do you combine your ordination with your lay work??

I'm on a sort of permanent leave from the Maritime Conference, and it doesn't really enter into my life at all. That is, I don't preach... except to students.

Do you still perform any duties as a minister?

No, I have no parish work.

How do you see Victoria's relation to Emmanuel?

There's Victoria University. It's composed of Victoria College and Emmanuel College.

As a theological college, Emmanuel has a dual responsibility—one being, to the church, a training ground for new ministers; the other, to Victoria University, being an academic institution. Do you see any conflict, or potential conflict, in this duality?

No, not necessarily conflict. I think that the existence of Emmanuel is very important—and probably indispensable—in maintaining the sense of Victoria as an autonomous university, the fact that it has a college that is peculiarly its own. But the fact that it is also a professional training school for United Church clergymen doesn't "bother" me; it doesn't affect the arts teaching.

You say that it doesn't "bother" you.

Well, I thought your question implied that it might.

There are those who feel that Emmanuel is shadowed by Vic and who would like to see them on more equal grounds, just as there are those who feel that Emmanuel's 50th Anniversary was perhaps overshadowed by your installation as Chancellor. Is this just pettiness, or is there some validity to this?

Well, I don't know. I suppose, again, it's the case of the mouse and the elephant, the college with 100 students and the college with 2500 students. They're bound to be somewhat unequally paired.

I was forced to say much more about Victoria than I could say about Emmanuel because I've worked at Vic and I know it better. Of course, I'm also a graduate of Emmanuel, and I thought it was very sensible of them to combine the two affairs. I really don't think anyone was squeezed out as a result.

Of yourself, you've said: "I've been told I'm very difficult to talk to. I seldom take the initiative in conversations. I suppose I'm a listener rather than a talker." As a symbol of Victoria University, you'll be in a fairly public position. Will that reticence work against you?

Yes, I think it would. It's worked against me all my life. It would work against me whatever I was.

But while I say I'm a listener rather than a talker, of course I'm a professional talker. I can do that, at least.

As Chancellor, will you be involved with the raising of funds for Victoria?

I shouldn't think so. I'm no earthly good at it. I don't know what contacts there would be, and I've never been in any sense a fundraiser. I just don't know where the money is or how to talk to the people who've got it.

Of advertising, you've commented that it's a judicious mixture of flattery and threats. In a sense, the Chancellor is a walking, talking advertisement for Victoria. Do you foresee yourself employing flattery and threats?

No, it's a much more genteel form of advertising I'm going to be involved with. I won't be talking about body odor... that kind of thing.

Claude Bissel, past President of the U of T, was quoted in Time as saying: "Northrop Frye is the best literary critic of our time . . . He is also a social critic of wide range and unusual perceptiveness and in this respect he occupies a position in the 20th century similar to that of Matthew Arnold in the 19th."

And Frank Jones, in the Toronto Star, wrote: "Northrop Frye, thank heavens, eats Shredded Wheat for breakfast and just loves ice cream . . . Frye, without meaning to be, is one of the scariest men in the Canadian world of learning. His students sit mute and awestruck as the Great Man glides soundlessly up and down the platform . . . seeming to float above the ground as he delivers his distilled wisdom."

What do you think when you read things like this?

I have to read them as though they were about somebody else. Once you let things like that take over, you're sunk. I know there are many things about me on which other people are much better qualified to express an opinion. I have to detach myself from the person they're talking about. The public man and the private man are always two different people... there's no way out of that.

When were you first aware of being a public man?

The transition came fairly early. When my first book appeared *Fearful Symmetry*, 1947, I shot up from assistant professor to full professor within a year, and I noticed immediately that my relation to the students had completely changed. While I was assistant professor, I was Big Brother—students would come to me and tell me their troubles. After I became full professor I was "a man with a book and a

legend” and the relationship was different.

Which did you prefer?

It’s not a question of preferring. It’s what you’re stuck with. I don’t buy that business about my students being awestruck. I haven’t noticed a great deal of awe in my students.

You’ve said that for verified experiment and observation, students need to face in the same direction; for ethical choice, they need to face one another. In what ways do you think Vic and the other colleges might best enhance this somewhat paradoxical position?

The main concern of the federated colleges is with the humanistic and the existential subjects where the students are facing one another. That’s been their traditional strength. They gave up their teaching of science—their labs and so forth—with the federated system. What they are now are humanistic communities.

You talked in your Installation Address of the importance of the study of ilk social use of science. How do you feel that might be better explored?

I was thinking there of things like the ecology movement, the sense of the growing energy crisis, the preservation of the environment, the preservation of buildings in the city, and so forth. Those all add up to a very widespread social concern with the environment. The old notion of Canada as a land of unlimited natural resources, and that all we have to do is keep mining the coal and cutting down the trees, is a very sinister and a very dangerous philosophy now—but it’s not reflected in our curriculum. Presumably we have people in Forestry trained in the importance of the conservation of forests, but I think that the element of society’s use of science and technology is really an aspect of humanistic study. I think that will become a part of our curriculum in the very near future. It would be best taught in the college structure because it’s a humanistic thing more than a matter of laboratories.

What events of the last fifty years do you think have made the greatest impression on the university?

I think that what affects the university is the general economic situation. If there’s a depression, the university’s this kind of thing; if there’s a boom, it’s that kind of thing.

The boom period is of a somewhat doubtful value to a place like Toronto because Toronto is the obvious place for centralizing things—big research institutes and big grad schools—and I think that the core of all university education and university work is the small, liberal arts, undergraduate community. It’s a great misfortune for a university when it gets taken over by the research and the graduate work. A place like Columbia, for example, has to fight for the autonomy of its undergraduate college. To that extent, there has always been an emphasis on undergraduate teaching at the U. of T. which I’ve always thoroughly approved of, and which I think the federation system has a lot to do with. I would want to keep on trying to fight for that.

More generally, how do you think the economic situation affects the needs and wants of the students, especially in the last decade?

There was a great deal of hysteria around in the late 60s which was a result of economic prosperity. The students who raised hell around that time were the offspring of well-to-do families, students who were trying to express some kind of revolt against middle class values and had no idea where to take it. Students are said to be much more utilitarian now, much more preoccupied with getting jobs, which one can understand. But I think there is another side to it: I think that students today are more attracted by genuine social issues than by phony ones.

Of the activities of the young reared on television, you once said that they “showed symptoms both of a withdrawal from waking reality and of an irritability of the sort produced by dream deprivation. More important [television] made the impact of cliché mythology so intolerable that it provoked a frenzied reaction of it, followed, as such outbreaks must be, by a kind of stupor.” That was in 1976. Are we still in a stupor?

I was speaking of television that made an impact as new popular art forms do. There have been a series

of those: the movies at the beginning of the century, radio in the 20s and then television in the 50s. Television was the most penetrating of all the media that has yet been invented; it comes straight into the home—it brings the actual image into the home—and its impact on people, especially on young children who sat in front of the TV for hours a day, was overwhelming.

There was a good deal in the hysteria of the 60s which was a result of the psychological effect of television. I was teaching at Berkley at the time of the “People’s Park” business, so I know what it’s like to be in a university where there are tear gas and soldiers with bayonets. I felt that, while the students who were making the noise were certainly not “watchers of television”, nevertheless they had been, and there was what I called a frantic kind of rejection of TV because it just brought the whole American middle-class set of values right into their living rooms. Then there was a period of almost eerie quiet in the early 70s. What I think is the long-range event is that society is gradually assimilating and containing television as a medium.

The rejection of it seems to have been to little end. Do you see it happening again, let’s say, in the next ten years?

I think that what there is is a process of assimilation so that you don’t need these violent extremes, where students say: “Our parents accept all these values . . . we reject them!” There’s a settling down process where it becomes a condition of the environment.

With the youngest students today being in their teens, and the oldest alumni being in their nineties, how do you think the university might better accommodate the generation gap?

I don’t feel that the generation gap is really that much of a problem. That’s why I mentioned in my [installation] Address the dinner that we gave first-class Honours graduates along with the graduates of fifty and sixty years back. That was where I became aware of the fact that continuity was far more important than the rather superficial changes in manners, and in the anxieties about liquor and that kind of thing.

The best way to overcome the generation gap is to get more and more people into university education.

How do you think the College might better accommodate its alumni?

Well, it’s doing its best. Certainly the federated colleges were working with the alumni much more effectively than the professional faculties appeared to be for many years. When the University of Toronto began to take a real interest in its alumni, it found that places like Victoria and Trinity and St. Michael’s had already been doing it.

And that’s another aspect of the “intellectual home” for the students. The efforts that are made by the Victoria Alumni [Association] to keep the alumni coming back to lectures, social gatherings, and so forth, add up to quite a remarkable social service.

“Within the framework of the University community, students are in an ideal situation to face one another.” As you noted in your address, the university provides a stage for students, but once they leave, their community expands and becomes more diverse. Do you think the university should provide a stage on which the alumni might come face to face?

There are efforts to do that, such as the “Mind & Matter” series of lectures, but the best way to do it, although it’s a very complicated social issue, is simply to provide a full-time return to the university for people in their 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s.

Getting and keeping more and more people in university education. How do you see that coming about?

As I say, it’s a complicated social issue, but I don’t think the undergraduate, liberal arts community should be the exclusive preserve of the age group from 18 to 22. It should have all age groups in it. A teacher who was trained in 1929, who is still teaching, is in some danger—for all the professional development!—of losing touch with the modern concepts of his subject. I don’t think you can make that up except either by unusual energy or by a full-time withdrawal—a sort of immersion course. I think

society ought to provide for that.

As a scholar, what do you think is your strongest asset?

I don't know... there are people who say I'm not a scholar, and perhaps they're right. I said in my Royal Bank Address that I regarded myself as much more of a teacher than a scholar, and that I thought of my books as teacher's books rather than as scholarly books.

I'm not very good at reading books that other people have not read; that is, I'm not a research person, particularly. I can see things that are close to the centre of a subject, and I can write with a certain amount of lucidity about it. Those are teaching qualities.

In 1967 you were the first person to be given the title of "University Professor." What does that title mean?

It means that I'm not attached to a department, and it means that I could teach whatever subject I like in whatever department was ready to accept me, but that I'm not a member of a department. I'm responsible directly to the President rather than to a chairman.

Has that allowed you more freedom?

Yes it has. It gets me out of department meetings, for one thing. I always feel that the university is a very paradisaal community if you cut out meetings.

When you finished your term as Principal of Victoria, you talked about having more time for your own work. Now, as Chancellor, you've taken on yet another responsibility.

Well, I'm afraid my work and my writing does have to come first. There's no arguing on that, because I don't run it—it runs me. Everything else has to get out of its way. But the people who asked me to be Chancellor know that.

Your wife went through a seven-year term with you as Principal, something which must have been a heavy responsibility for her as well. Now that you're Chancellor, she must feel a bit as if she's jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Yes, a bit. I'll try to keep the work to a minimum... for her.

Last updated: March 25, 2015

Source URL:

https://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/collections/special_collections/f11_northrop_frye/interview_1978