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Reviews of Books

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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Wilfrid Eggleston, National Research in Canada: the NRC 1916-1966.
Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978; 455 pp.

Can it be that the very obvious gaps in the history of science in Canada (agriculture, the Royal Society, etc.) are an incentive to produce second-rate books--books that will automatically be welcomed because they fill a gap, even if laymen do not read them because they are dull and scholars ignore them because they are devoid of ideas?

Wilfrid Eggleston's history of the National Research Council evokes this question not because of any uniqueness but because it is so typical of the main corpus of our literature: honest, workmanlike narratives, stuffed with facts, that everyone ought to read but no one will read for pleasure.

Two fundamental ideas seem to govern Eggleston's book, a rule-of-thumb and a social influence; but they are unable to provide the forward impetus to make it an interesting narrative or the intellectual structure to make it explain why historical events happened. It has some value as a reference book, for consultation about facts; but this value is limited because certain basic information (e.g. NRC budgets, divisional structure, and names of directors of divisions) is left out.

A two-page chronology epitomizes this basic problem of omissions and inclusions. It includes the postwar Technical Information Service but not Canadian Patents and Developments Ltd., construction of the Sussex Street building (1930-32) but not staffing and the beginnings of systematic research (1929, in the Edwards Mill buildings,) and so on. Eggleston would no doubt modestly say that he is only sketching a chronology, and not offering to judge that one event is more significant than another but this is not good enough. The serious historian is obligated both to discriminate between degrees of importance and to do so coherently, according to defensible criteria, consistently applied.

Eggleston's first organizing maxim, it seems, is that, to avoid bias, you must "let the facts speak for themselves." As a rule of thumb, both journalists and scientists voice this, and find it practically useful.

But it is a philosophical snare, because the facts so rarely speak for themselves. As Poincaré said of science, a heap of facts is not an intellectual structure. Nor, unfortunately, is Eggleston's book an historical narrative of causes: the reader looks in vain for the reason why one brick of fact was included and another left out.

The book's other pervasive influence is the NRC staff's own interior mythology, which is essentially a doctrine of personality: that the way to get the best results is to find the best men and give them the maximum freedom, and that this accounts for most of the NRC's genuine achievements (from inventing clever ways to refrigerate ships to stimulating the development of Canadian graduate education.)

This tribal myth is still alive and, whether true or not in any particular detail, has obviously been real (i.e. functional) in the NRC's actions and evolution. The trouble is, how to prove it? Before the Lamontagne Committee of the Senate, NRC scientists failed to convey this convincingly to laymen, and their traditions were savaged for their reward.

Writing as he did at the same time, Eggleston wished to preserve this real myth and justify its function in the NRC's history. But he could not find the evidence he needed in the deliberately impersonal documents (chiefly annual reports and presidential speeches) he relied upon for his raw material.

To be very specific, the oral tradition of the NRC hallows the memory of President Steacie as a charismatic leader, an acute scientist, and a wise planner. Documentary proof of this cannot be cited, because it is the sort of "judgment" deliberately suppressed in official documents, even including Council minutes. Since it is central to the NRC's tribal myth, Eggleston states it: but he cannot demonstrate Steacie's personality and its function in the evolution of the NRC Laboratories or in Grants & Scholarships. (In fact, like most "insiders" of the NRC community he fails to discriminate clearly between the NRC's functions of intramural research, extramural grants, and policy advice.)

By contrast, W.E.K. Middleton's book about intramural NRC physics goes much farther to demonstrate the evolution of the NRC as a changing, living social institution, rather than an impersonal scientific mechanism, and thus gets much closer to both the NRC's tribal myth and the answers to questions about "science policy."

Eggleston's much more ambitious book fails in interest and function because recorded facts did not "speak for themselves" and because its author was unable or unwilling to impose his own structure on events. In other words there are too few historical ideas, and those that can be found (in the tribal myth) are insufficient to shape the book, for lack of scholarly technique or historical imagination.

National Research in Canada will fill a shameful gap in our book lists, for the time being, and it is not a bad book. But the history of central Canadian scientific institution of the 20th century has yet to be written.

--Donald Phillipson
Ottawa