



David Bercuson

The Great Brain Robbery
Bercuson, Bothwell, Granstein
McClelland and Stewart
160 pages; \$12.95 softcover

The Great Brain Robbery is trash.

This quickly written, and hastily thought out book seems to have been written only to raise a few administrative hackles and maybe to raise a few bucks for the authors.

It's a case of shop talk gone wild: a handful of history professors getting together to bitch about the decline and fall of Canada's universities, and dreaming of how much better they would run the show.

The sad thing is that 160 pages of unsubstantiated gibberish will set you back 13 dollars.

The Great Brain Robbery bemoans the state of Canada's universities (its subtitle is "Canada's Universities on the Road to Ruin") and calls for such solutions as:

- raising tuition;
- raising academic standards, both to get into university, and to stay there;
- a core curriculum, maybe even a common year;
- abolishing faculty unions;
- replacing tenure with periodic reviews

The bottom line is if these three professors have their way, they would bring universities back to their glory days of the 40's and 50's an age when half as many students were getting an education, and when most professors weren't being pampered with sky-high salaries and tenure.

The authors themselves admit the book is nothing more than a long "polemic". There is no argument on the scholarly merits of the book either by the authors or its critics: it has none.

At best the book is shallow. At worst it belittles a very serious subject with 160 pages of conjecture, and these three professors confirm their own observation of the sloppy post-secondary system by being unable to produce anything more than a self-indulgent bitch session.

Not to mention the book's endless stream of contradiction.

For example, after whipping off this piece of fluff the authors have the gall to attack their colleagues for writing "trash": "Most university tenure committees tend to distinguish between serious works and potboilers, but trash always pays more than serious work. It always has and always will. So do we really need any more of it?"

The authors are also arrogant. They attack seniority by stating: "a 50-year-old welder who gives a company 20 years performs the same job, and probably with the same productivity as the 25-year-old welder standing next to him who has been employed only six months."

Ridiculing the blue collar may be acceptable in the faculty lounge, but it doesn't cut the mustard in the real world of pipefitters and plumbers. Not to mention the inappropriateness of the comparison.

The flying leaps of logic the trio takes are amazing. For example, how should universities get more money? Easy! You raise tuition. That way universities get more cash, students can get more scholarships, and everybody is happy!

But it doesn't work that way. If universities raise tuition, the first thing the government would do would be to make matching slices to university grants so the university would not be ahead by a cent.

Grants to students have been shrinking every year, as loans become a larger and larger part of the student financial pie, which means if you raise tuition, you wouldn't help universities one bit. It would also increase each student's debt load.

Not surprisingly, the reaction of university administrators to *The Great Brain Robbery* has been negative.

U of A President Myer Horowitz attacked the author's elitism at a recent Senate meeting. "I don't want the select elitist universities of the 50's the authors seem to want to revert to," he said.

Horowitz also attacked the authors solutions: "there are no simple solutions. We're not going to solve the problems of the mid-80's by restricting the number of students to the number of students that we educated in the 50's. And we're not going to wipe away staffing problems by removing tenure."

U of Chancellor Peter Savaryn joins in the refrain. He attacks the authors plea for elitist universities by pointing out that while Canada educates only 10 per cent of its population at the university level, U.S. universities educate 20 per cent of its population. "We still have a long way to go," Savaryn says.

What is really irritating about *The Great Brain Robbery* is that there are even valid points that become lost when the authors go over the deep end.

Some of their recommendations, such as a common year and tenure reviews on a periodic basis have some merit.

The authors might actually be able to suggest some realistic reforms if they were less strident, more constructive and better researched.

It would also help if they took longer than a weekend to write the book.

David Bercuson is a History professor at the University of Calgary and one of the authors of the *The Great Brain Robbery*. Bercuson was in Edmonton early in September and conducted the following interview with *The Gateway*.

Q: You argue for a more elitist university structure. By that do you mean that only the rich will be able to get an education?

Bercuson: NO. What we believe is that we should take the intellectual elite from high school and give them a good liberal arts education and then build specializations on that. We are not talking about a financial elite. None of the three of us come from a rich background. I wasn't rich and my kids aren't rich. We are not talking about only the rich going to school.

Q: Are you saying that not everybody should go to university?

Bercuson: No, not everybody should go to university, but we have a responsibility to give alternative post-secondary education to those who don't belong in university. Those who are suited to go to university should go, those who aren't should go somewhere else.

Q: What exactly are universities for?

Bercuson: Universities are to teach people how to think, how to use their minds, teach them how to critically analyse all aspects of society. I'm a history professor and I don't have a great memory for facts and figures, and I don't think that's important. You and I can look those things up.

The kind of things that happen in Eckville can and do happen on a daily basis in our universities because the students sit and uncritically accept what the professor pushes.

Q: What about the universities funding problems?

Bercuson: We want students to pay more money to give the universities more discriminatory funds. Universities are too tied to government funding. But we don't want anyone excluded from university because of a lack of money. The government should create an extensive level of scholarships.

Q: But what's to stop the government from cutting back the universities fundings, and what's to stop them from not giving students extra scholarships?

Bercuson: The government has to be forced into taking the proper actions through public pressure, but that is a distinct possibility.

Q: But what about our government in Alberta that has a huge majority and can't be easily forced to do anything through public pressure?

Bercuson: The situation in Alberta is an anomaly, we wrote the book to apply all across Canada.

Q: What about tenure?

Bercuson: We now hire people on a probationary basis and give them tenure after 10 years. Instead we would hire people on 5 year contracts and review them by a panel of 10 or 15 honest and credible professors at the end of that 5 year period.

Let tenure last 5 years, not a lifetime. It's now virtually impossible to weed out of the system the incompetents.

Tenure came in to protect academic freedom, and academic freedom should be protected, but it should not be abused.

Q: Is there a conflict between teaching and research?

Bercuson: There shouldn't be a conflict. We are hired and paid to do both jobs. Research should aid the professor to renew him in his teachings. They're two sides of the same coin. Too many professors write the same set of lectures and deliver them for 30 years.

Research need not be a limiting venture, it can be a good thing.

Q: What did your peers think of the book?

Bercuson: A number of people were upset about what they thought would be in the book. Eighty per cent of the people who belong to the universities will agree with 80 per cent of the book.

We looked at all the universities in Canada with a critical eye, and were equally hard on everybody. The faults of the system lie on the doors of almost everybody involved. We will tell you in our book exactly what we believe.

A tale of thr

It's fall. And in the fall authors are pushing

Robin Blaser and Stephen Scobie spoke in English, with support from the Canada Council for the Arts.

Matt Cohen also spoke in the same series. day's Gateway. David Bercuson was in town and agreed to be interviewed.

Stephen Scobie is a former member of the U of A Department of English. A prolific writer who won the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1980 (for *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*), he is currently on staff at the University of Victoria, where he is editor of the *Malahat Review* and Professor of English. A punster at heart, Scobie's poetry is concerned with words, their origins, and their expression. His themes are drawn from his environment, and his rhymes come from the past. Stephen Scobie returns poetry to the oral tradition from which it sprang; his poetry, unlike children, should be heard and not seen.

Q: Is poetry moving away from academia?

Scobie: I don't think it's moving away now any more than it has, say, in the last ten or twenty years. I think there are some movements now in Canada, especially in Toronto, of street poets, the so-called "dub-pods," reacting very strongly against the academic slant, and you will find these non-academic movements, but at the same time there is still a number of poets who are in one way or another connected to the academic circuit, many of us as teachers. On the whole, I tend to think of us as a healthy thing, if not necessarily for the writing of poetry, certainly for the teaching of poetry. To have so many poets involved in the universities I think means that they teach poetry in ways which are much more lively and less academic than poetry has been traditionally taught. I make no apologies for the fact that my poetry is sometimes academic, that my poems sometimes have footnotes at the end, or contain allusions. That is the world that I experience and is the world I live in. It would be entirely fake if I tried to write poems about coal mining. I think there are some people who write good poems about coal mining, but I think you have to experience coal mining to write good poems about it. What I know is the world of books, ideas, the world, if you like, of academia. That's what I write best about.

Q: Where are you from originally; where do you currently call home?

Scobie: I was born in Scotland. I came to Canada in 1965, when I was 21 years old. I have lived in Canada since, on the West Coast and the Prairies - first in Vancouver, then 12 years in Edmonton, and then back to Victoria. So there are various answers to where I call home. At the moment, in the strictly limited sense, home is Victoria. In a broader sense, the original home is still Scotland. I described myself years ago as a Scot living in Canada, owing allegiance to both countries, and I think I would still stick to that. I have found since moving to Victoria that I am very much at home on the West Coast, and that is almost certainly harking back to my Scottish origins. On the other hand, all my sports allegiances remain strictly Edmonton - Eskimos and Oilers, forever.

Q: The Prairies and the West Coast seem to be dominant in Canadian poetry. Is this so?

Scobie: I think that tends to be a perspective you have here, and if you lived in Toronto you would have a very different perspective. There have been certainly over the past ten or fifteen years very strong movements in poetry in both the prairies and the West Coast, which tend to be more readily identifiable, which tend to label themselves in a regionalist way more than, say the poetry which is written in Toronto, which is in its own way regionalist, and tends to rather blithely assume that it is the nation. So I wouldn't say that at the moment any one area of Canada is particularly dominant. There's a very strong group of English Canadian poets in Montreal, and there always will be by sheer economic consideration a preponderance of Canadian writers in Toronto and Southern Ontario. Some of our very best young women poets at the moment in Canada are in Toronto and Ontario.