

The Trouble with Students

Robertson Davies, author of the trilogy **Fifth Business**, **The Manticore** and **World of Wonders**, is one of Canada's most distinguished men of letters. He is also Master of Massey College, a prestigious graduate school associated with the University of Toronto, and he is currently writing a novel about university life. Below, he talks about students, history, language and money.

The Knowledge of History

Today's Canadian graduate students are much ahead of those in my day because graduate studies then were just making a beginning. As for American students—we have a lot of them at the University of Toronto—they have a terribly narrow knowledge of history. They only know American history and something called civics. They do not know Queen Victoria from Henry VIII. This gives them a very limited idea of the past. Some make the effort but some never do, and this is evident in a good deal of the scholarly writing of our time—a lack of historical sense. The Canadian students aren't very good either.

Language

It is as though [the students of today] are unable to understand that what they have written can be interpreted three or four different ways. They all lack a definite sense of language. They were not instructed in language and in historical studies. Instead they have been taught how to make the Tomb of Christ out of cardboard. They've had little training in speaking with clarity. It is fortunately correctable. I simply insist that students make verbal presentations in seminars. I say you may talk as you wish, but if you wish to be understood you must learn the Mandarin dialect, English as it is spoken by educated people in England and the United States. What you have to understand is that you cannot express an idea accurately until you have thought accurately, and to do that you must have the vocabulary.

University Finances

Until five years ago the Canadian universities got a lot of money from provincial governments. The governments wanted scientists and engineers. They were interested in what they called goal-oriented research—striped paint for barber poles. Governments are capricious, so they turned on the universities. It is always a popular thing to do; they see it as cutting out frills. Fees must be raised, and the students resent it. Students don't seem to have much grasp of economics, even those who are studying economics. They protest that the university fees are too high, but they do not seem to realize that when fees are low the difference is paid by taxes.

The universities are cutting staffs by not replacing those who retire. I am not at all sure that a lack of affluence isn't very good for a university. They certainly waste money on scientific stuff. Now the scientists are having to work out their problems, making what they need out of safety pins.



The Canadian Way

All Canadian children above the ages of six or seven (depending on the province or territory) must go to school.

Almost all the schools—from kindergarten through university—are supported by the taxpayers.

The British North America Act of 1867 gave the provinces exclusive jurisdiction, and they provide most of the money and set up their own individual systems. There is no federal department of education, but the federal government is responsible for educating non-assimilated Indians and Eskimos.

In Alberta and Newfoundland an apt student can get a college degree in fifteen years; in Prince Edward Island it takes sixteen, and in Quebec and Ontario it can take seventeen. Ontario's secondary schools offer an optional thirteenth year, and students taking it need attend university for only three years to qualify for a degree, or four years for an honours degree.

The whole system is currently going through a crisis of adjustment. As the baby boom bulge has passed through the grades, enrollments have fallen. Between 1971-72 and 1976-77 the number of pupils in grades one through six dropped 14.4 per cent, and the number in grades seven through thirteen, 11 per cent. In 1968 there were 3.8 mil-