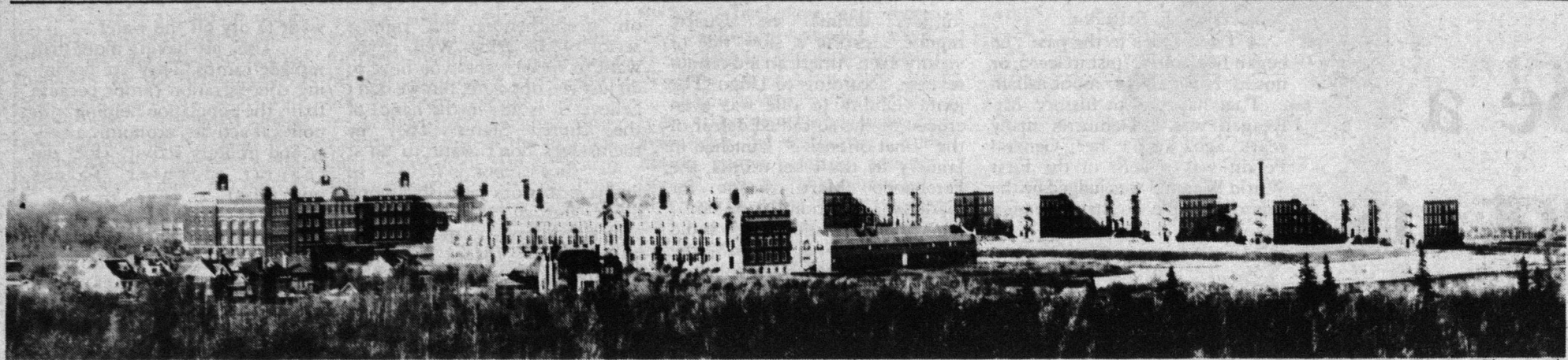


# ARTS



No Tory Building, no SUB, and Quad ran up to Saskatchewan Drive: the University of Alberta as it appeared on Oct. 9, 1926.

photo courtesy Glenbow Photograph

## Former President writes middling history of U of A

A history of the University of Alberta  
Dr. Walter Johns  
University of Alberta Press, 1981

review by Peter West.

This University is a mere seventy-five years old. Not very old, really, when you compare it with universities like Oxford and Cambridge or institutions like Harvard, but one of the oldest in western Canada. The University is, according to Peter Leslie, the second biggest in Canada, and it clearly aspires to rival the biggest and most prestigious universities in the United States.

It is not very surprising, therefore, that the university jealously guards its independence, its standing within the province of Alberta, and its history. Although a number of histories of the University have appeared, a recently published History of the University of Alberta, published by the University Press, threatens to eclipse all the earlier works. The book was written by Dr. Walter Johns, the University's president from 1959 to 1969. It is a work of significance to anyone concerned with education in western Canada and something of a challenge for a reviewer.

The history of an institution is a particularly tricky matter, especially when written by a participant observer. Writing about your own life and times is not for the average man, nor even for the average academic. It is simply too difficult

isolating personal experiences from significant other experiences, and there is a constant temptation to throw in pieces such as "walking across the quadrangle with professor Smerdly one Wednesday morning, it suddenly occurred to me that..."

Thus the real challenge is to write a history which goes beyond the common room and the faculty club. In some ways a president is badly qualified to write about a university, which he must tend to see as *his* university.

A case in point is the student protest movement at the U of A in the 1960's. Did the university escape the student radicalism which swept North America because of Dr. Johns' leadership, or because the student radicals were badly led, or because of the apathy towards politics which might be said to be characteristic of Albertans? Dr. Johns is too close to the matter to explain. A more comprehensive account will have to wait for a more comprehensive view of North American campuses.

The worst fault of the book, paradoxically, is one which will make it popular with former students of the university. Hundreds upon hundreds of them are mentioned by name, as are many of the university faculty. Clearly it is useful to know the names of the first faculty, all five of them; but by the 1960's the task of naming important members of the university community has become im-

possible. Nevertheless, Johns continued. It might make interesting reading for those who knew the professors named, but it is very dull material for newcomers.

On the other hand, there is a wealth of detail which enlivens the book and will entertain the most casual reader. Numerous incidents in the university's history are well told; for example, the 'Aberhart Affair' of 1941.

The president of the day, Dr. Kerr, wished to give Premier Aberhart an honorary degree. A Senate committee met and agreed that the award should be made. Dr. Kerr then went to see Aberhart and told him of the degree, inviting him to receive it at the forthcoming Convocation. But when the full Senate met, supposedly to endorse the decision, one member requested a secret ballot. The rejected the decision to award the degree by one vote.

Naturally Aberhart was outraged and the press clamored for action against the University. President Kerr resigned and a Survey Committee was established to inquire into a number of issues regarding the university and its governance. The result was large-scale and permanent changes in governance.

This incident, and others, have never been explained better, and they make it clear that the university's standing in the community has always depended heavily on the relationship between its president and the provincial premier.

Some other details in Dr. Johns' book are worth mentioning. It may surprise some student to hear that Joe Clark was editor of the *Gateway*; Dr. Johns says he was one of the best editors it has ever had (that doesn't say much for the others, some people will say.)

In one editorial he stated dramatically: *Public service, on any level, is a bed of thorns, not of roses. The glory in it, if there be any at all, is small return for the constant responsibility, the exhausting work, the lost sleep, and the ever-present complaints...*

It would be tempting to apply this comment to Clark's recent political

history

Dr. Johns speaks highly of *Gateway's* quality during his presidency, although he says that it had a tendency to write about non-issues (has it stopped?). He adds that it won numerous prizes for being the best student newspaper in the country; perhaps its quality has fallen off during the last few years.

Despite rather primitive conditions and failure rates of up to 63 percent, students in the Johns years seem to have been an active bunch. Rodeos, demonstrations, afternoon teas, teach-ins, and horse-play are noted by Johns as filling in much of the time. On one occasion, many years ago, at the first convocation of agriculture students, one of them let a fowl loose in the auditorium. The resulting noise, and mess, can be imagined.

Regular events seem to have included an annual snake dance down Jasper Avenue, a Mock Parliament, and a Mardi Gras, to say nothing of the mysterious activities of the Wauneita Society (a club in which homesick Australians learned to play the didjeridu, perhaps?). None of these activities have survived. Student today give the impression that food and marks are the only things that make them tic.

It is simply not possible here to do justice to Dr. Johns' book. Its main failings are its excessive detailing of staff changes and its inability to sit back and take note of the changing position of the university within the province.

Clearly, the university does not dominate the province as it did, even in 1960. But the book has immense strengths: quite probably it is one of the best of its kind. It is readable and illuminating, especially on the early years of the university.

Sadly, the account stops with Dr. Johns' retirement in 1969. Perhaps another writer will cover the period immediately following, which was one of increasing difficulty with governments. But the man who tries to surpass this volume will have to be very ambitious indeed.

## Footnote to Milosz

by Jens Andersen

How could one possibly dislike such a kindly old man as Czeslaw Milosz? The obvious answer is, one can't.

There he stood in Convocation Hall like some kindly Polish papa reading his chaste poems to an audience of about 200 respectable-looking burghers, 150 students, and 4 nuns. Rarely did his voice rise above conversational loudness. Much of his poetry was in a romantic pastoral vein replete with magpies, martins, fishermen, the promise of the earth, and wine sleeping in casks of Rhine oak.



Nobel Laureate Milosz

Even those poems dealing with the horror of the modern world were intoned more with regret than anger or agonizing. And when he read his credo, "Ars Poetica?" with its call for a discreet art that won't upset one's relatives and neighbors — poetry inspired by "good spirits, not evil ones" — he almost apologetically preceded the poem with the remark, "I am not sure my recipe is correct."

As you may have discovered in my article in Tuesday's *Gateway*, I am decidedly of the opinion that his recipe is incorrect: that the general populace is benefitted by good therapeutic kicks in the seat of learning, and I, for one, am always happy to administer it.

Nonetheless, although my philosophy is almost completely antithetical to Milosz's, it would be false to say I was indifferent to his soothing poetry. After all, at the end of a long day or a hard battle even firebrands and revolutionaries begin to long for surcease. At such times one puts Maria Muldaur's "Cool River" on the stereo, or reads Swinburne's "Garden of Proserpine," or listens to Milosz poetizing the eagle to sleep.

Milosz is also interesting in the perspective of the current turmoil in Poland. Sociology professor Karol Krotki, who introduced him, linked him with "the forces of freedom" by stressing how many copies of his books were now selling in Poland, and the length of the lineups of people waiting to buy them.

Milosz's exact politics I am not acquainted with, but judging from his poetry his main political ideal is peace and quiet. Certainly there was nothing incendiary in what he read Tuesday night.

The same could not be said for Dr. Krotki. In his introduction he fulminated about "the forces of darkness" in Poland (twice), and also referred twice to Milosz's literary talent as "the power of the word" as if there was some mighty religious quality in his poetry which could beat back the commies.

If I had been Milosz I would have snapped back, "Poland can be freed without resorting to moralizing and histrionics," and dumped the convenient pitcher of water on his head.

But no doubt the dignified Milosz would have deemed that excessive.

## ARTS QUIZ

An Arts page reader complained last week that he couldn't identify the author of even a single quote in last week's quiz. What he failed to realize is that the whole idea of the Arts quiz is to pose unanswerable questions so that readers will acquire an inferiority complex and be less inclined to criticize our reviewers.

However, since there are at least three or four drops of pity in the Arts editor's heart, there will be a week's respite for tough questions while we have a multiple-guess quiz:

1. What disease did Beethoven, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have in common?
  - a) tuberculosis
  - b) syphilis
  - c) crabs
  - d) Upp's Syndrome
  - e) Down's Syndrome
  - f) German measles
2. What event inspired Neil Young to write "Ohio"?
  - a) Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia
  - b) Nixon's decision to invade Ohio

- c) The Kent State Massacre
- d) The Orangeburg Massacre
- e) The Alice's Restaurant Massacre

3. What was the title of Sinclair Lewis' Nobel Prize speech?

- a) The American Fear of Truth
- b) The American Fear of Literature
- c) The American Fear of Medicine
- d) The American Fear of Fear Itself
- e) American Fearlessness

4. H.L. Mencken titled his six volumes of essays —

- a) Obsessions
- b) Dogmas
- c) Prejudices
- d) Crotchets
- e) Denunciations

5. Which of the following is not a chapter head in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*?

- a) Why I am so wise
- b) Why I am so clever
- c) Why I erect such profound philosophy
- d) Why I write such excellent books

answers on p.6