

*P. B. Waite*

### **Allan Bevan's Dalhousie**

Dalhousie thirty years ago was a place quaint enough. You knew everybody, often about everybody; you made forays into other departments, Chemistry, Economics, Philosophy, Physics. You had lines of communication to Law, Medicine, or even Dentistry. You would go to lectures and watch experiments. If you were not careful wandering around the old Forrest building, where Anatomy was, you might occasionally find yourself, late of an evening, in an ancient elevator, with old McLeod and a corpse or two going upstairs to the Anatomy laboratory to be ready for the next day. Life was small, intense, informal, in Archie MacMechan's little college by the sea. Archie had died in 1933, but the littleness and essential kindness of the place lingered on.

You talked endlessly about things that seemed to matter very much. You devised inter-faculty seminars. One, sponsored by G. V. Douglas, Head of Geology, was on the nature of evidence and we spent two days at it one weekend in 1954. Everyone who was anyone was either in it or at it, George Grant, John Graham, Allan Bevan, Jim Aitchison—the younger men mainly. There were public lectures, too; they were one way the public could know what university was like, and in the days before television they gave the public access to learning, ancient and modern. We were always giving public lectures, both inside the university and out. We did not get any money for it; we had a distinct notion that we ought to do it as a public gesture of gratitude for the luck of having a job at all, and a job that most of us loved even if the pay was terrible.

I do not know what Allan Bevan's salary was when he came to Dalhousie in 1949, but it was not much more than \$3000 per year, if that. That was not exactly Dalhousie's fault; its salaries were low because, mainly, it got its money from only two sources, student fees and whatever endowment it had. The province of Nova Scotia had almost completely abandoned, some seventy years before, any pretence at supporting its own universities. Allan Bevan was like most of the rest

of the young professors, he rented a house of some sort, had a wife and growing family; he owned an ancient car of dubious vintage bought second hand, that limped through the world, leaving a trail of burnt oil and carrying a soggy smell of old seat covers. The new cars at Dalhousie belonged to the students who seemed to us rather better off than now. They were, probably, since the cost of university was higher then, relative to other things.

Dalhousie's male students were apt to look rather casual in their appearance, though more spruce than at present. The main difference was, I suppose, with the women students. If they were casual it was a casualness carefully studied and elegantly sweated, and almost never in anything but skirts. That gave them a swish and an air of mystery now rather lost. Some of the young women were turned out in fashion quite breathtaking, and which was so intended. Allan Bevan and I both had, as student, a beautiful young Canadian princess who arrived at our lectures nearly always three minutes late. She was covered in a luxurious fur coat, the rest of her ensemble to match. When she arrived all communication between Allan and his class stopped dead. The class looked at her. Allan looked at her. This gorgeous creature was perfectly aware of it. She would sit gracefully down in the front row, throw her fur coat off her slim shoulders, cross her elegant long legs, and, looking up brightly at Allan, would indicate, with a faint, aristocratic bow of her lovely head, that she was graciously pleased that Allan should begin. Or begin again, as it really was. She was very intelligent but very distracting.

There were other young women whom Allan admired in that artless way of his, whose approval he (and I) sought still more; their intelligences were formidable enough that you wanted their approbation. They would let you know by some distant sign of approval if your lecture came up to their high standard, and also, somehow, if it did not.

Allan and others of us talked endlessly about President Kerr (1945-1963). It is curious that he should have been the subject of such intense interest, for he was not arresting either in manner or appearance. He was short, unprepossessing, and he had a smile that nearly always excluded any smile in his eyes, very unlike Allan who smiled with his whole face. President Kerr's blue eyes struck one as watchful, uneasy, a little like a very important person at a cocktail party who is instantly prepared to desert you upon the arrival of someone whom he discerns is more on the level of his importance. Alexander Kerr, or "wee Alex" as the less reverend of us called him, was, poor man, doubtless doing his best, but there was precious little that he did that seemed right to us, or that did not come under our critical eye. We disliked the more direct evidence of his penny-pinching which struck us, even on our salary, as

grubby. We may not have known, though the older members of the staff knew, that penny-pinching was what he had been brought here for, from Pine Hill Divinity College. We disliked his too righteous intolerance of beer, wine and spirits. We might have known that the violence of his temperance principles owed much to some real, early and hard experiences in Cape Breton, and which knowledge might have enjoined some charity in our judgments of him. But of charity we had little; we thought of him simply as a little man in too big a place. It could not have been easy for him, though it might have been some consolation to him to know that we talked about him so much. He was saved from our full obloquy by having the extraordinary sense to have married a sweet-tempered and intelligent wife who went to great lengths to make up in kindness to us what her husband was. She partly succeeded. President Kerr did get the new Arts and Science building put up, and which, finished late in 1951, we moved into without any particularly generous thoughts to the President.

Up there on the third floor was where most of us in the Humanities and Social Sciences were; though English was immured in the wartime building where Education now is. They would come up to join us in the Faculty Room and enjoy the best view of the campus, of the sea and woods that surround this blessed peninsula. There we talked about life, letters, teaching and Alex Kerr. George Grant would discourse about moral values, moral purposes, while attempting (in vain) to restrain his bad language at having missed a shot at billiards, that he frequently played with Jim Aitchison. What sticks most in one's head was talk, a combination of Pierre Bayle, Plato and billiards, to say nothing of periodic visions of the Trinity. It was great stuff. Or Allan would give us some of the more picturesque sides of the life of Dryden—his Ph.D. subject—to say nothing of definitely scabrous doggerel about the court of King Charles II. One of our number, fairly steeped in concupiscence at twenty-six years of age, remarked one day that although he was not a practicing nudist, he thought it would be interesting to visit a nudist colony, incognito of course. One of us, a friend of Allan's, looked up and remarked with only the ghost of a smile, "Don't be a fool, Smith, you'd be recognized at once!" That was wit, however scabrous the theme, and I hope it was wit that mainly animated us.

We listened and we learned, I think, from each other, about what a university was for, and the great world of learning that Allan and others of my contemporaries, were just coming into. I know my own education began then; Allan was some years older and was married; still, he was part of that Dalhousie that took all the world of learning for its source of knowledge. Our dinner parties (with the older men and

each other) were punctuated with periodic hunts in the *Britannica* (Eleventh Edition *bien entendu*) to settle some point of learning; or to a row of Baedekers, not to find what church had Michelangelo's *Moses* in it, (everyone civilized was supposed to know about San Pietro in Vincoli) but more recondite things. Where were the Pinturricchio frescoes that described the life of Aeneas Sylvius, Pius II? In the cathedral of Siena. What were the greatest cathedrals of the world, and why? Complete a quotation from English poetry, or occasionally from French or German. Gradually a whole world opened up for new, raw, half-finished, Ph.D.'s like Allan and me, that had little to do with being Assistant Professor of English, or Lecturer in History, but a great deal to do with making young Canadian academics conscious of the academic tradition of which they had recently become, even though not formally inducted, a part.

Whether Allan and I were ever quite conscious of the privilege of all this at the start, I do not know; but the more we were caught up in it, the more we realized that we were being educated, and indeed that our education was, only then, beginning.

We were taught to distrust publication. There had been only a modest tradition of publication at Dalhousie. You read your subject, *tout court*; and better still, if you were in English or History, you spent as much time as possible walking it. Publication, mere publication, was the refuge of the drones, Americans frequently, from whose country this pernicious doctrine had come. They, poor devils, knew aught else. They chiselled their little cherry stones, published their little pieces in the little academic magazines, (like this one), put out their little *curricula vitarum* in their little worlds at the end of the year. And all as if it meant something. We were taught it was not worth doing such stuff. What mattered was, not adding a small meagre drop to the great ocean of truth, but to measure its distance, begin to survey its vast horizons. What you wrote was not what mattered: it was the students in front of you, many of them from backgrounds that had little pretension to thoughtfulness, charm, elegance, learning or wisdom. How do you get them to value those things, or how do you instill in them some of the same wonder and excitement that you ought, as a proper intellectual, to have been plunged into? You taught your subject from the inside outward, not a set of facts to be learned, but a vision of something translated from inside yourself, judgments nourished, weighted, and thought about. It came, at least in Allan's discipline and mine, from those who had walked the world, talked to its people and read its books.

The men who most embodied this tradition had been at Dalhousie a long time. George Wilson of History had come in 1919 from Queen's

and Harvard out of Lanark County, Ontario; J.G. Adshead of Mathematics in 1929 from Manchester; C.L. Bennet of English in the 1930's, from New Zealand and Cambridge, W.R. Maxwell of Economics from Pictou County and Harvard. There were others in the sciences of analogous reputations, Jack Johnston in Physics, F.R. Hayes in Zoology, Howard Bronson in Mathematics, Bronson an exemplar of the Student Christian Movement that swept Canadian universities at the end of the First World War. What one remembers about nearly all of them was the protean reach of their knowledge, the contemporaneity of their information, the vivacity of their humour. Nothing was very sacred, and it doubtless was encouraged by the fact that Wilson and Adshead were both bachelors. Adshead remarked once, *à propos*, "I didn't start out with the intention of being a bachelor. It's just that as I became more particular, I grew less desirable!" Maxwell was married, but his wife had been ill in hospital for years, and he functioned rather in this bachelor milieu.

The winter diversion was mainly dinner parties, sometimes with women (friends and wives), sometimes not. Their dinners were cooked with rare skill, and not only by the women. The bachelors were excellent cooks, and proud of it; one remembers Adshead's baked halibut with oyster stuffing, served with a Pouilly Fuissé. They served wine with taste, profusion, even on occasion with abandon. This at a time when ordinary Canadians (like Allan and I) could hardly have told you what table wine was. In the spring and fall, armed with survey maps (or a geological map, *faute de mieux*) they would get off on weekends with lunches, sweaters, packsacks and hiking boots, to discover Cape Split, Pennant Point, and other carefully judged possibilities.

Through all of this they read as they taught, on an heroic scale. So much so indeed (remembering the piles of books from two different libraries in various corners of their establishments), that one is a little ashamed on reflection of what one, since, has not read, being preoccupied with researching, writing, publishing, and having forgotten or pushed to one side, the fundamental point that reading one's subject is the most difficult feat of all.

Allan moved slowly into all of this, measuring its form and pressure, but conceding much to the charm of its civilization, its patience, its unhurried pace, its sense of life *sub specie aeternitatis*, to its having become the touchstone of everything that mattered to a man of letters. He took it as an intelligent Canadian should, not losing his own earthliness or his pride in what we had done as a country, and might yet do in literature. He was still a prairie boy who had never lost the wonder for the western prairies, its atolls of trees, its ship-like farms, its

distances and its light. Were we not to be converted by culture into being Europeans; we were *sui generis*; but we were so as Canadians who thought and learned, and who respected thought and learning. We were as pained at the false-front Athens of the west as at the preciousness of the Masseys of the east. We strained mainly for light, and hoped that our students would catch that same yearning that we had come to cherish and could never satisfy.