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The Excellence Debate and the Invention of Tradition at Mount Allison: A Case Study in the Generation of Mythology at a Canadian University*

Universities are prone to clothing themselves in tradition. While this characteristic may be most conspicuous in the quasi-medieval rituals that accompany the granting of degrees, it appears also in the tendency of particular institutions to lay claim to distinctive principles that are held to be sanctified by long adherence. Yet universities are also part of society. They are constantly affected by social change, as well as influencing it in turn. Traditions are never as immutable as they might seem, and at times the pace of adaptation is fast enough to put them in serious jeopardy. Canadian universities in the 1990s, if the decade yields the financial cutbacks and challenges to university autonomy that seem likely at its outset, will undoubtedly face questioning of their most cherished values. Debates over openness to students from all social and ethnic backgrounds, and over the maintenance of academic quality—or, as one federal government report glibly put it in 1988, “access to excellence”—will force universities to review not only immediate priorities but also the more fundamental questions of why they do what they do and how far continuity with the past can or should be maintained.¹ As changes take place, universities will also be faced with the choice of whether to admit freely that they as institutions have been altered, or to attempt deliberately or unconsciously to accommodate change within a mythology of continuity.

Such questions are not new in the history of higher education. Canadian universities, in particular, experienced a period of crisis during the 1950s and 1960s when similar issues of accessibility and quality were at stake. This article will examine the response at that

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time of one university, Mount Allison, which made significant modifications in its institutional goals in the early 1960s, and then gradually assimilated them in a revised body of principles which attained the status of traditions even though they were not closely related to any historical reality. Using the concepts broached in the collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in 1983, entitled *The Invention of Tradition*, the article will treat Mount Allison as a case study in the generation of a mythology which enabled the appearance of continuity to be maintained even at a time of rapid change. "Invented tradition," as defined by Hobsbawm, "is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." Invented traditions are further characterized by "emerging . . . within a brief and dateable period—a matter of a few years perhaps—and establishing themselves with great rapidity," one major category including "those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities."²

On 14 February 1962, the Mount Allison Faculty Association's committee on excellence inaugurated one of the most important debates in the university's history by presenting its preliminary report to a general meeting of the association. The ten-person committee had been chaired by Alex Colville of the department of fine arts, and its report offered an outline of ways in which the curriculum, teaching methods, academic structures, and community life of Mount Allison could be radically reformed in the interests of high intellectual quality. The existing twenty course credit degree would be replaced by one in which students would pass or fail each year as a whole, and would do so chiefly on the basis of instruction in small-group tutorials. The curriculum, the report argued, should be centred on "the basic disciplines in Arts and Science." Accordingly, departments such as mathematics and English would be greatly expanded, as would other arts and science departments to a lesser extent. The professional departments, notably engineering, home economics, and commerce, would not be expanded, and certain social science departments (notably psychology and sociology) would also remain small. As the faculty expanded, student numbers would be held steady, so that a faculty-student ratio of 1 to 10 would be achieved. Both faculty and students would be recruited for their excellence, and measures would be taken

to strengthen the library and to improve the physical facilities and the cultural qualities of the campus. "By establishing cultural activities in a position where they will become a part of everyday experience," the committee concluded, "we can introduce the members of our community to beauty as well as pleasure, and to enlightenment as well as sociability. Mount Allison's tradition enables us to do this more effectively than any other Canadian University."³

The reference to Mount Allison's tradition, in the closing sentence of the report, was significant. Although it referred specifically to the university's religious and artistic associations, it hinted at a concept that became essential to the university's official discourse in the ensuing years: that Mount Allison was a university with, in the Canadian context, a unique mission, and that this sense of mission was based on the university's historical traditions. Frequently drawn in the early 1960s was the analogy between Mount Allison and the liberal arts colleges of New England. One influential document—the university's brief to New Brunswick's Royal Commission on Higher Education (The Deutsch Commission)—went as far in December 1961 as to describe Mount Allison as "essentially a liberal arts college." As a historical statement, this was not accurate.⁴ Yet the view soon came to be widely held that Mount Allison was and should be a small, liberal arts institution, and that this institutional character was substantiated by tradition. For all that, the initial presentation of the Excellence report on St. Valentine's Day did not mean that love and harmony were the qualities that it would primarily bring out in the Mount Allison community. Three meetings and a number of amendments were required before, on 1 May, the association approved the report for communication to the general faculty and the board of regents.⁵ Its contents were not yet formally divulged to students, who had to be content with rumor and hearsay until details were finally made available in the student newspaper, the *Argosy Weekly*, in January 1964.⁶ The omission was an ironic one in the sense that student response to certain of the principles contained in "The Idea of Excellence at Mount Allison"—or "the Excellence Report," as it soon came to be termed—was important not only in shaping Mount Allison's participation in the conflicts that characterized the later 1960s at Canadian universities, but also ultimately in entrenching the invented traditions that came to be closely related to the report's proposals.

The immediate origins of Mount Allison's self-appraisal of the early 1960s lay in the developments of the preceding decade. The 1950s had been a time of expansion for the university. Between 1951-52 and

1962-63 student enrolment had almost exactly doubled, from 612 to 1225.⁷ The expansion in numbers was only part of the change that had taken place. Students were now drawn from a wider geographical area, 31.7 percent originating from central Canada by 1962-63, as opposed to the norm of about 11 percent which had prevailed as recently as in the mid-1950s.⁸ The subjects of study chosen by the students had also changed. Professional programmes had grown during the 1950s, to the point where in 1957-58, no fewer than 37 percent of all students were enrolled in engineering, commerce, or home economics; by 1962-63, the proportion had fallen to 28 percent.⁹ Finally, the percentage of students who professed an affiliation with the United Church of Canada, at this United Church-related university, was falling steeply: from a postwar peak of almost 69 percent in 1953-54, to 59 percent in 1962-63.¹⁰ Whether Mount Allison liked it or not, change was occurring. The question was, however, which of the trends should be encouraged and which resisted. Most discussion centred on the relatively simple matter of size. Many of those associated with Mount Allison, especially alumni and the regional leaders of the United Church, applauded the growth in student numbers. The Maritime Conference of the United Church adopted as official policy in June 1957 an editorial statement from the conference newspaper, the *United Churchman*, which declared that "a policy that would restrict enrolment in these days when increasing numbers of young people are seeking entrance to universities just could not be defended." The statement concluded unequivocally that "Mount Allison must expand."¹¹ Even in 1957, however, there were others—among the faculty and on the board of regents—who believed that further expansion would be too expensive even in the context of increasing government grants, and that it would lead to a dilution of academic quality.¹² The dilemma was real, and acute.

This immediate question had to be faced in two wider contexts. The first was historical. The historical legacy bequeathed by Mount Allison's past was, in certain respects that were important to the dilemma of the late 1950s, decidedly unhelpful: namely, on the matter of size and on the extent to which Mount Allison should be an institution of the liberal arts. Mount Allison had begun as a boys' academy in 1843, and had grown substantially throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, to reach a peak of self-confidence and prosperity in the 1890s. The twentieth century, however, had not dealt kindly with the institution, and the period up until 1950 had seen a long series of crises brought about by financial problems, world wars, economic depres-

sion, and disastrous campus fires. Through that half-century, crisis management had inevitably prevailed over profound or sustained thinking as to the University's character and goals. Thus, while the idea of a liberal education could be traced back to the Wesleyan Academy of the 1840s, it could hardly be seen as having exerted any consistent influence on the shape of the curriculum. The tendency had been for the curriculum to expand in prosperous times, to encompass professional and postgraduate programs as well as undergraduate instruction in the liberal arts and sciences, and to contract when economic constraints so dictated. The same could be said of student enrolment. When expansion had been feasible, as in the 1880s and 1890s, and in the 1940s and 1950s, the university's administrators had often encouraged and praised it. The only times of self-denial—in the 1870s and in the 1920s—had been times of economic and financial uncertainty. It was true that the university's president during the mid-1920s, George Johnstone Trueman, had developed a persuasive rationale for renouncing unrestricted growth at that time and concentrating on undergraduate instruction. Also, in 1943, an influential policy committee of the board of regents had declared that Mount Allison "should plan to grow in excellence of work rather than in an increased number of students."¹³ These, however, had been responses to quite different circumstances from those that prevailed in the 1950s. The reality was, first, that Mount Allison's historical legacy contained more precedent for growth and diversification than it did for deliberate restraint but, secondly, that so much past policy-making had been improvised in response to crises that the overall legacy was ambivalent at best.¹⁴

The second context into which Mount Allison's situation had to be placed was that of the general development of Canadian higher education in the 1950s. Although the most dramatic expansion of Canadian universities would take place during the 1960s, the foundations of growth were firmly laid during the preceding decade. The prerequisite was, in part, the initiation of substantial federal spending on higher education, following the report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (the Massey Commission) in 1951. Also a factor was the realization by the universities of the mid-1950s, and by governments, that the post war "baby boom" generation would soon be swelling the numbers of applicants to universities, and that the universities had better be prepared to receive them. In November 1956, the National Conference of Canadian Universities held a conference on "Canada's Crisis in Higher Education"

to discuss this approaching influx, and at the same time the federal government doubled its university grants.¹⁵ However, as Paul Axelrod has shown in his studies of university development in Ontario and throughout Canada, there was more to the expansionist climate of the 1950s than government funding and student demand. Private business, reflecting a wider public opinion, was increasingly inclined to support and subsidize university expansion on the ground that higher education contributed directly to economic growth. Although this support was directed partly to curricular fields—such as engineering, law and commerce—which might be taken to relate directly to business interests, it was also extended to the liberal arts and sciences, on the ground that general learning and adaptability were economically valuable both to the educated individual and to society. As Axelrod has also shown, academics of the era “could not but be enthralled at the [resulting] expansion of their own professional opportunities. . . .”¹⁶ Finally, the success of the Soviet Union in launching its *Sputnik* satellite in 1957 prompted much public agonizing throughout North America about what must have gone wrong in western higher education. A flood of writing, especially in the United States, pressed the need for better support for higher standards in education, encompassing both technical education and the liberal education which was regarded as embodying the values of western civilization. Higher education came to be regarded as a prime means by which Soviet prowess could be matched and overtaken.¹⁷

Given the climate of the late 1950s, it might seem unusual that Mount Allison would opt for restricted enrolment. The board of regents, in October 1959, voted in favor of a moratorium on expansion beyond 1200 students, although eventual growth was still expected once resources permitted. Just over a year later, in December 1960, the board’s executive committee took a more decisive step by extending the limit of 1200 for at least ten more years.¹⁸ Yet in some important respects the restriction was not so surprising. For one thing, it proceeded from an alliance between faculty and business of the kind that Axelrod has described as a “symbiotic relationship.”¹⁹ It was the faculty association that took the initiative in February 1959, by setting up a committee to examine “the general problems and implications of expansion of the size of the student body.” The committee, chaired (as would be the Excellence committee) by Alex Colville, did its work quickly and in April its report was presented to the association and approved for circulation to members of the board of regents. The report came out strongly against any further expansion in the imme-

diate future, on the ground that faculty resources and physical facilities were already over-taxed. Instead of expanding, the committee argued, Mount Allison should seek to improve its academic quality—described as “not outstanding” hitherto—by more selective admission from a widened geographical constituency. This in turn would enable the university to attract and retain faculty members “of high calibre.” The report concluded by re-emphasizing the link between small size and high quality: “if, as appears likely, the majority of Canadian universities plan to expand, we have an opportunity to offer a special service to both our constituency and the nation by providing a university that is small, residential, and of significant quality.”²⁰

This report, clearly a direct ancestor of the Excellence report, found quick acceptance by the board of regents. At the time, the board was in the midst of a major effort to shift the basis of its fund-raising away from the traditional church-related sources and towards large corporate and private donations. Committees headed by prominent business leaders had been established in both Toronto and Montreal.²¹ That the board, on the advice of its policy committee, endorsed the faculty association’s recommendations by planning a moratorium on enrolment increase in October 1959, was an indication, among other things, that it believed that the concept of an institution of deliberately limited enrolment and high quality would appeal to potential donors who believed in the economic value of liberal arts education. This belief was strongly reinforced when Ralph Pickard Bell became chancellor in 1960. Already a strong advocate of limited enrolment, Bell announced in his installation address that a campaign to raise \$15 million would immediately be launched—aimed in the first instance at “industrial leaders”—so as “to retain and attract the calibre of Faculty and Administrative Staff, and provide the additional Plant that will firmly establish Mount Allison as the leading University in Canada in the Arts and Allied courses. This . . . should be our objective in the decade of the Sixties!”²² The alliance between Bell—recently retired at the age of 74 from a business career that had included a number of company presidencies—and the faculty was not always an easy one. Bell was often impatient at the tendency of faculty members to voice and write their opinions in a manner that would have ill befitted a corporate employee, while faculty leaders were unsure whether Bell fully understood the academic concepts he endorsed so confidently.²³ Nevertheless, the alliance was strong and it became stronger in the following year of 1961. Discussions between the faculty association and the executive committee of the board of regents proceeded on a basis of

unprecedented cordiality, and culminated in the entrusting of the composition of the university's brief to the Deutsch commission to a committee that included just one member of the executive committee, W. B. Sawdon, and no fewer than four members of faculty.²⁴

The brief to the Deutsch commission was not discussed by any official body of the university before its presentation in Moncton on 11 December 1961. The arguments which undoubtedly would have been aroused by such a discussion were, in effect, held in abeyance until the launching of the Excellence debate a few months later. The brief, not surprisingly, emphasized the role of Mount Allison as a small and selective liberal arts institution, in putting the case for increased funding by the government of New Brunswick. Despite the emphasis on the importance of the liberal arts in "an increasing number of speeches and statements by responsible leaders of our society in the professions, in business, and in government," the brief complained that funding in Canada was inadequate, especially by comparison with the situation in the United States. "Thorough and radical reassessment of our liberal arts programs" was needed, it continued, and "a determination to devote a larger share of the nation's resources to these programs." Since Mount Allison was "essentially a liberal arts college," its claim for increased government support was, the brief concluded, "authentic."²⁵ The commissioners agreed, and their report recommended in June 1962 that "Mount Allison continue, for the foreseeable future, its announced policy of development as an undergraduate liberal arts college of limited enrolment."²⁶

By the time the Deutsch report was complete, the Excellence debate had already begun. Since 1959, great force had been gathered behind the concept of Mount Allison as a small, selective, liberal arts institution. Trends in student enrolment supported it: the wider geographical constituency, the resurgence in arts and science, and the decline in the proportion of those with United Church affiliation. The only proviso, of course, was that actual numbers should be stabilized at 1200, and the actions of the board of regents had ensured that this limitation would be observed. Mount Allison's new character had been successfully linked to the wider concern for higher education in Canada that elsewhere was prompting government and the corporate sector to encourage expansion. Here at Mount Allison, high quality, rather than sheer size, was the watchword, and it was guarded by a strong alliance between the faculty association and the executive committee of the board. As yet, little effort had been undertaken to define how, if at all, the university's new direction would imply any form of conti-

nunity with its past. Beyond occasional vague references to tradition, and the analogy to a liberal arts college made in the brief to the Deutsch committee, the tone of the various reports and arguments that had advanced the cause was much more one of radical departure than of continuity. Even the Excellence report's closing reference to tradition was only a brief reference to a past which was more often portrayed in unfavorable terms as having bequeathed an overworked faculty, students of questionable academic standard, a run-down physical plant, and an inadequate library.

When the opposition to the Excellence report burst forth in 1962 and 1963, however, its arguments drew heavily on interpretations of the history of Mount Allison. In December 1962, following several months of argument on the campus, a meeting of the general faculty appointed a committee to gather and circulate comments on the report from all concerned members of the faculty. Not all the comments were critical. Clearly, the report had gathered considerable support. Where criticism was strong, it came partly from departments (notably the professional departments, and psychology and sociology) which felt that their disciplines had been slighted or misunderstood. In general, however, a major division emerged between those who were committed to selectivity, the geographically wider constituency, limited enrolment, and concentration on the liberal arts, and those, on the other hand, who believed that the stampede away from Mount Allison's admittedly poorly-defined traditional character was hasty and ill-considered. Time and again, the critics argued that the Excellence report, if implemented, would constitute a repudiation of Mount Allison's traditional responsibilities. According to L. A. Duchemin of the English department, the University would "disengage itself from its past traditional role, (one that is assumed by every other university) of educating a representative cross-section of the community in which it is situated. . . ." ²⁷ Another comment, by Allan MacBeth of the French department, complained that "no consideration is given in the Report to the specific character and purpose of Mount Allison as it was set forth on its foundation and as it has existed since its beginnings in 1839. Mount Allison is essentially a United Church College serving the Maritime conference." ²⁸ A. J. Ebbutt, former dean of arts, chided the authors of the report for their "lack of knowledge or . . . wilful ignoring of the history and place of Mount Allison," and regretted that the report "did not acknowledge the excellent work which has been performed at Mount Allison in the past under conditions which few, if any, members of a faculty would tolerate today." ²⁹

The divisions within the faculty were deep. In part, they reflected age and postgraduate training, the advocates of the Excellence report being more likely to be young and many having joined the faculty in the 1950s following training at major graduate schools in Canada or elsewhere. Often impatient with what they regarded as the mediocre academic standards of students and of the more senior of the faculty, members of this generation were eager to take issue with the manifestations of the old Mount Allison, such as the church relationship, the regional constituency, and the policy of expansion. Ranged against them were those who, for whatever reason, felt inclined to defend one or more of these traditional characteristics. There was, of course, a limit to the effectiveness of traditionalist arguments, in the context of the Deutsch commission's endorsement of Mount Allison's character as a small, liberal arts college as the basis for provincial funding. "The Deutsch report has made a fact," acknowledged Ebbutt, "what the [Excellence] REPORT had presupposed, namely, that Mount Allison shall remain small and independent."³⁰ Nevertheless, there was still much room for debate, and its virulence was disturbing even to many of the participants. "The Report clearly created a deep and serious split within the University," wrote Ian L. Campbell of the department of psychology and sociology: "many of us have spoken with insufficient tolerance, moderation, knowledge and thought."³¹ It was no doubt partly for this reason that the students of the university were deliberately kept out of the discussion. "We don't think that it is advisable to bring this delicate matter before the student body at this time," was the kind of reply *Argosy* reporters found their enquiries receiving in early 1963.³²

There were, in fact, two other circumstances that made the matter more delicate still. One was that the 1962-3 year was an interval between university presidencies. The retiring president, W. T. Ross Flemington, who had departed in the spring of 1962, had taken no strong position on the Excellence report or on related questions of selectivity and restricted enrolment. His personal instincts had always favored expansion but, reaching the end of a long and testing period as president, he took no public issue with Bell or with the faculty proponents of limitation.³³ The new president, L. H. Cragg, thought differently. As early as the fall of 1962, he had privately written approvingly of the Excellence report, and his arrival in 1963 was awaited keenly by its advocates.³⁴ The second complicating circumstance was that 1962 was the year of the ending of a major link with the United Church. An alteration to the university legislation in the spring of that year

changed the composition of the board of regents so that the majority were no longer appointed by the church. The change was aimed at making Mount Allison appear less of a denominational institution when private or government funds were solicited, and it passed off with little protest. Nevertheless, the turmoil on campus—particularly when a powerful churchman such as A. J. Ebbutt, no longer dean of arts but still head of the department of religion and director of theological studies, was in the lists—had the potential to spark off a more general critique of Mount Allison's new policy direction that might result in the alienation of traditional church and alumni support. The execution of a major shift in orientation in the face of criticism based on evocations of Mount Allison's historical character, was difficult enough without incurring the outright opposition of the wider traditional constituency.

In the event, the results of the Excellence debate were much more limited than the authors and proponents of the report had hoped. Within a few years, disillusionment was being expressed by former members of the Excellence committee at the lack of effect of many of their recommendations, including such major ones as the year-and-tutorial system and the balance of strength among departments.³⁵ Indeed, for this or other reasons, the majority of the authors of the report had left Mount Allison within five years of its presentation. The alliance between the faculty association and the executive committee of the board also failed to survive far into the 1960s. By 1966, Ralph Bell was privately expressing disappointment "that we have not made greater progress toward the attainment of our objective," and agreed with his close advisor and executive committee colleague W. S. Godfrey that a number of the faculty had been abusing the spirit of excellence by marking their students too harshly and causing high failure rates.³⁶ Godfrey himself reflected in 1969 that "Mount A. suffered a bad set-back when it was hit by the virus bug of so-called excellence. Standards were hoisted unreasonably, the excellence boys marked their examinations with undue severity and word got around that it was next to impossible to be accepted at Mt. A."³⁷ Despite the disillusionment, however, there was no doubt that a profound change had taken place. It could be seen in the limited enrolment which was now an established policy and would remain so despite the tendency of student numbers to rise gradually, reaching close to 1800 by the mid-1980s. The change could be seen in the physical appearance of the campus, where the number of buildings more than doubled between 1957 and 1966.³⁸ More generally, it was described in a reflective article

in 1974 by L. A. Duchemin, who praised the buildings and the cosmopolitanism of the 1960s, but recalled the 1950s as “the age of innocence,” something akin to “a golden age.”³⁹ The change was hard to define precisely, but one way in which it could be measured was in the new style of the university’s official discourse.

From 1963 onwards, public statements made in the name of Mount Allison by university officers or publications repeatedly emphasized continuity throughout the university’s history, and described the policy decisions made in the early 1960s as affirmations of its traditional character. Mount Allison, the argument was made time and again, had remained true to its roots as a small, residential university, while all around it were succumbing to the temptations of expansion. Excellence, too, now passed into the common currency of the university’s self-representations. This approach, which differed widely from the short shrift which had hitherto been given to the university’s past by the reformers, was a reflection in part of the efforts of the new president to find a synthesis of the radically different views of Mount Allison’s character and mission which had emerged from the Excellence debate. Prior to his assumption of the presidency, Cragg had endorsed in an *Argosy* interview the concept of Mount Allison as a small university characterized by high quality in the liberal arts, but had also indicated support for other “traditional faculties” and had accepted that the university had a particular responsibility to serve the Atlantic region.⁴⁰ Cragg’s inaugural address in October 1963 stressed similar themes, reaffirming the Maritime constituency and the church relationship—graduates should be “intolerant of social ills and sensitive to human needs”—while also including an unmistakable endorsement of what was, though couched in the language of tradition, a new departure for Mount Allison. “It [Mount Allison] intends to remain,” Cragg declared, “as it now is, small, residential and uncomplicated . . . , giving major attention to providing the best possible liberal education at the undergraduate level. It intends to remain true to its own nature and traditions and true to the essential idea of a university as a community of learning and culture. And in all this its aim is excellence.”⁴¹

More generally, the new rhetoric of Mount Allison’s tradition of small size and liberal arts orientation, which would evolve gradually into the assertion of a tradition of academic excellence—a notion that coexisted uneasily with the original arguments of the Excellence report—represented an effort to reassure both faculty members and members of the university’s long-standing constituency that the past

was not being abandoned. Descriptions of the changes taking place which explicitly emphasized radical reform were now rare, though they surfaced from time to time, as in the *Argosy* report in late 1966 that students had met with the university president to discuss the character of "the 'new Mount Allison'" that had been created in the wake of the Excellence debate.⁴² Particular attention was given to reassuring the Maritime Conference of the United Church, and the opening of a new campus chapel in 1965 was the occasion for public celebration of the church relationship. This at a time when the proportion of United Church students had continued to fall—to just over 52 percent in 1965-6—and when, as some conference members pointed out, even the remaining regents appointed by the church were normally selected by a nominating committee appointed by the board itself.⁴³ Church and alumni disquiet, however, did not focus primarily during the 1960s on academic or religious questions, but rather on athletic results. Influential alumni inclined to blame poor performances by university teams on the new academic emphasis. Because of rumors of Mount Allison's unreasonably high academic expectations, suggested W. S. Godfrey in 1969, "other universities . . . reaped a harvest, particularly with the Athletic Type."⁴⁴ The question of sports performance was serious enough to find a prominent place in president's reports of the late 1960s, and remained a sensitive issue in later years.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, this was an issue that could readily be separated from the more central questions of the university's mission, and at times it provided a lightning-rod to draw the criticism of the university's traditional supporters away from those crucial areas.

Thus, by the early 1970s, the new approach of just over a decade earlier had firmly established its place in the university's official discourse as a tradition. In 1973, for example, Mount Allison's brief to the New Brunswick Higher Education Commission included a statement which 15 years earlier would have caused consternation on the campus, in the Maritime Conference, and among the alumni, but which was now serenely presented. "The University," the brief declared, "is firmly committed to . . . [its] tradition and policy of limiting its size and range of offerings, and defining its objectives so that within its resources it may do well what it elects to do. It is a selective University in the sense that, while there are no barriers of race, sex, religion, or politics, it chooses sparingly what it will teach, it chooses carefully who will teach, and it seeks to admit those students who will benefit from rather demanding programs of study and standards of performance."⁴⁶ What the brief enunciated was, in the terms set

out by Hobsbawm, an invented tradition. Clearly, this is not to impute to it a sinister quality, or to assert that it was based on a tissue of falsehood. What it did represent was the extraction of certain elements from a thoroughly ambivalent historical legacy, the development of the practice of letting these elements alone represent the historical past, and the connection of this reconstructed past with the collective norms and values which the university wished now to profess as its *raison d'être*. This was not, again in Hobsbawm's terms, the kind of invented tradition that was deliberately "constructed and formally instituted," but rather one that had emerged as the product of many individuals and committees "within a brief and dateable period."⁴⁷ As the principles involved had moved towards the status of accepted mythologies, they had largely escaped criticism—except in peripheral ways—from the university's constituency as represented by church and alumni. This was an important element in their acceptance, but ultimately more important was the response on the campus itself.

Among the faculty, the Excellence debate of 1962-63 was not repeated. It had exposed deep divisions, and to some extent the animosities lingered. Nor did relations between the faculty association and the university administration proceed smoothly as the 1960s went on, with a number of disputes over tenure, of which the most severe was associated with the dismissal of a member of the music department. The Catherine Daniel case eventually brought Mount Allison under the censure of the Canadian Association of University Teachers in 1970.⁴⁸ Never again, however, were the mission and the historical character of Mount Allison debated as they had been at the time of the Excellence report. The 1960s were a decade of considerable faculty mobility, and the collective memory of the faculty was shorter than had been true in previous years. By 1973, the proportion of those of professorial rank who had served for ten years or more, and thus could even remember the Excellence debate, was only 31.8 percent. Of the equivalent group of 1963, by comparison, 46.4 percent had completed ten or more years at the university.⁴⁹ For newcomers, the university's size and professed orientation towards the liberal arts were established features of its institutional character which they had presumably weighed before accepting appointment, and so were less likely to be fundamentally questioned. Controversies did arise, to be sure. A major curriculum reform which took effect in 1973-74, involving the replacement of major and minor requirements by interdisciplinary areas of concentration and emphasizing the individual relationship between student and faculty advisor, was preceded by a lengthy debate

which raised some of the same curricular questions as had the Excellence report.⁵⁰ In general, however, the president's report of that year was accurate enough in claiming that at Mount Allison, by comparison with other universities, "there is a greater degree of consensus . . . on what we should be and what we should do."⁵¹

The response of the students was more complex, and ultimately more influential on the future character of the institution. Initially, to judge from the contents of the *Argosy*, there was no doubt in the minds of students that the Excellence debate marked a sharp turning-point for Mount Allison. Reactions were mixed. In March 1963, an *Argosy* editorial complained of difficulties encountered by students in obtaining information about the Excellence proposals, but went on to condemn what the report was rumored to contain on the ground that it would confine Mount Allison to "brilliant" students, and so would imply a repudiation of responsibility towards its traditional constituency.⁵² Further student criticism was aroused in the following academic year when new dress codes were introduced for both male and female students, imposing especially stringent requirements for evening dining. This was a product, at least in part, of the Excellence report's emphasis, in its comments on the communal nature of the university, on the need to "foster a sense of decorum by insisting upon a civilized atmosphere in the dining rooms."⁵³ When the actual contents of the report were released to the students, however, recorded opinion was largely favorable. In January 1964, a number of honors students wrote an open letter to Chancellor Bell, supporting the concept of "making Mount Allison the most excellent Liberal Arts College in Canada."⁵⁴ In February, two series of *Argosy* interviews with students also elicited mainly favorable responses. The proposal for the "year-and-tutorial" system was sceptically received by some, but in general the report had clearly stirred only limited opposition.⁵⁵

As the 1960s went on, however, the Excellence debate as such faded from students' attention, as other issues arose. During this decade of student insurgence at many universities in Canada and elsewhere, Mount Allison students were well informed. Major disputes at the neighboring University of Moncton, at the University of New Brunswick, and further afield, were well publicized at Mount Allison, and evoked supportive responses.⁵⁶ At Mount Allison itself, a number of skirmishes took place between the university administration and the *Argosy*, and two outright clashes. One took place in the fall of 1964, when the entire *Argosy* staff resigned in protest against pressure which it reported feeling from the administration to become a virtual public

relations vehicle for the university. Publication was interrupted for more than three months until a new advisory board was formed, with guarantees of editorial independence.⁵⁷ The second upheaval involved the effective dismissal of the editor by the university in early 1968, following his decision to print Jerry Farber's article, "The Student as Nigger."⁵⁸ Outside of these episodes, however, the main collective action of Mount Allison students came in mid-February 1968—shortly after the *Argosy* incident—and took an unusual form. Earlier in the month, New Brunswick universities had announced that their fees would be raised in the following year, and had blamed inadequate provincial funding. While not opposing proposals for strike action by students in Moncton and Fredericton, the Mount Allison student union decided on a "work-in" as its protest. For a day, students would work at odd jobs in Sackville, for 25 cents per hour (defining odd jobs as those where the students would not be competing with established workers), to raise funds to help students in financial difficulty the following year. The local *Tribune-Post* reported that the university had cooperated by rescheduling classes, and that \$500 had been raised by 600 students performing more than 1400 person-hours of work. The demonstration did not succeed in heading off fee increases, but it did gain the editorial applause of the *Tribune-Post* for being "orderly, sincere, and constructive." It was a mild form of protest by the standards of 1968, and supporters of the university even privately attempted to gain fund-raising mileage from the apparent contrast, as well as from the students' 1968 decision to withdraw from the Canadian Union of Students.⁵⁹

Why was the Mount Allison campus a less turbulent place at this time than was true elsewhere? Did this bespeak an inherently more conservative student population? Clearly, such attitudes are difficult to measure precisely, but the extensive campus discussion of all the characteristic student concerns of the era—the Vietnam war, the capitalist economy, drug use, sexuality, the women's movement, and others—suggests that Mount Allison students were not so different. In reality, the evidence points towards a more complex explanation. As Patricia Jasen has shown, an important and often overlooked element of the Canadian student movement of the 1960s was its criticism of the arts curriculum. Brought up on idealistic views of universities as scholarly communities based on humane values, many Canadian students of the era found themselves on newly-expanded campuses—sometimes in half-built buildings—where inexperienced faculty members attempted in vain to deal with ever-growing bodies of students.

Worse still, many arts courses struck students as having little bearing on the world they lived in. As well as showing complacency in the face of war, poverty, and the military-industrial complex, courses and entire programs often failed the elementary test of giving due attention to the Canadian experience. Departments dominated by non-Canadians proceeded at times as if Canada did not exist or at least had no significance.⁶⁰ It would obviously be too much to claim that Mount Allison was innocent of all of these too-common failings. Nevertheless, the institutional character and mission which Mount Allison had assumed in the early 1960s, and the invented traditions that now prevailed, pre-empted in many respects the agenda of the student movement. Small size, and the commitment to teaching in the liberal arts, were two characteristics of Mount Allison that obviously differentiated it from many other Canadian universities. The notion of community, which had been so prominent in the Excellence report and had led on the one hand to controversies on dress codes, led on the other to acceptance of the principle of student membership on university committees. In a 1965 editorial, the *Argosy* was sceptical of the progress that had been made, and in 1967 another editorial called explicitly for student representation on the senate and on the board of regents. "Without active involvement by the students," it warned, "there can be no community."⁶¹ The university moved quickly to satisfy this demand, at least in regard to senate membership, and by September 1969 the newspaper was expressing satisfaction at the presence of six students on senate and the approaching prospect of board representation: "this is the campus revolution," it proclaimed, "and it is what, believe it or not, has put Mount A., small, unexciting old Mount Allison, in the vanguard of university change."⁶² In the same month, Mount Allison also inaugurated what was, at the time, the only undergraduate program in Canadian Studies. Funded by a private endowment apparently prompted by Mount Allison's commitment to the liberal arts, the program was launched with a special convocation and a symposium on Canadian issues.⁶³ As well as indicating a curricular interest in Canadian issues, the program reinforced the overall Canadianness of the university. The lack of large-scale expansion during the 1960s had insulated Mount Allison to some extent from the major influx of non-Canadian faculty that had occurred elsewhere. The president's report of 1971-2 noted that two-thirds of Mount Allison faculty members had earned their first degrees in Canada, that a number of the just under one-fifth whose origins were in the United States had now taken Canadian citizenship, and

that no department was dominated by non-Canadians: "in short, this is not an issue at this university."⁶⁴ Whether by wisdom, pure chance, or a premonitory exercise in social control, Mount Allison's decisions of the early 1960s had anticipated in key areas the student complaints of later years, and had thus led, for the most part, to the maintenance of peace on the campus.

This did not mean that students were uncritical of the university. By the early 1970s, however, the student critique had settled along certain lines. It was true that there was a major exception at the spring convocation of 1973, when the student valedictorian launched a strong attack on the personal ethics of the business leaders to whom the university was awarding honorary degrees, until interrupted by the university president, but this was an exceptional incident and was identified as such by the *Argosy* in a special editorial.⁶⁵ More common criticisms were twofold: one specific, one more general. Frequently identified as a student concern was the series of tenure-related disputes which exposed divisions within the faculty, and between faculty and administration in which—as the *Argosy* commented in late 1971 in the context of the Daniel case—students were inevitably liable to be caught in the middle.⁶⁶ The more general criticism was that the university was hidebound by tradition. "Nothing ever changes," commented the *Argosy* in December 1975, "especially at universities such as tradition-bound Mount Allison. . . . If we all were to come back in thirty years, probably only the fashions and hairstyles of Allisonians would have changed. Issues and attitudes remain constant."⁶⁷ By responding in this way to repeated statements by university officials and publications that Mount Allison was a university that had continued to be governed by its long-standing traditions, the students of the 1970s played a major role in the entrenchment of that notion. Unlike their colleagues of the previous decade, who had clearly perceived that—for better or worse—major changes were afoot, the students now had accepted the reality of the invented traditions as a prerequisite for criticizing their influence. The comparative lack at Mount Allison of a student critique that accused the university of betraying humane values or of selling out to military-industrial interests, had led to criticism from a different direction that portrayed the institution as being too comfortably ensconced in its cocoon of traditions. Paradoxically, this argument was in itself a powerful affirmation of the authenticity of those same traditions.

Within a period of less than 20 years, therefore—from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s—Mount Allison University had drastically altered its

collective understanding of its mandate and of its nature as an institution. The pivotal event had been the Excellence debate, in which the concept of Mount Allison as a small, liberal arts institution had been strongly advocated by some, and rejected on historical or other grounds by others. The origins of the entire question had lain in the dilemma faced by Mount Allison in the 1950s, as to what should be its future strategy. That the initiative should have been taken by an alliance of faculty leaders and corporate supporters, and that the result was a discussion of what constituted excellence in university education, was not unusual in the Canada of the late 1950s and early 1960s. What *was* unusual was the linking of excellence to the renunciation of growth and the deliberate restriction of curriculum. As the debate proceeded, however, these radical proposals proved alarming enough to important sectors of the university community and of the church and alumni constituency that efforts were made to demonstrate that violence was not being done to Mount Allison's traditions. The result was the rapid generation of new traditions, which had only a tenuous link with historical reality but which satisfactorily embodied the values that the university had now embraced. During the later 1960s and the early 1970s, these constructs became increasingly firmly entrenched, until they had attained the status of virtually unassailable mythologies. Included in this process were the university's administrators, the faculty, and the wider constituency. Especially important, however, was the effect of the new concept of Mount Allison on the student culture of the university, and the ultimate acceptance by students of the authenticity of the associated traditions. In terms of the replacement of the confusion of the 1950s by a clear vision of Mount Allison's character which could command wide acceptance within the university community, the results were conclusive. Doubts and uncertainties were laid to rest as the discourse generated by the Excellence debate in the early 1960s came to prevail as an accepted orthodoxy. The firm entrenchment of the ideas and the terminology of that era provides, for the historian, a revealing example of the effective invention of tradition in a university context.

NOTES

1. Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, *Access to Excellence: Being Canadian . . . Working Together for Post-Secondary Education, Federal-Provincial Initiatives* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1988).

2. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 1, 9. For an alternative discussion of the role of tradition in universities, and of the mutability of traditions, see Edward Shils, *Tradition* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 179-84, 213-61.
3. Mount Allison Faculty Association, "The Idea of Excellence at Mount Allison," 58 and passim.
4. Mount Allison University Archives [hereafter MAA], "Brief to Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick, 1961," Archives Office, Committee Files, Reports to External bodies, 5; John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A History, to 1963* (2 vols; Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984), II, 355-62.
5. Mount Allison Faculty Association Minutes, 14 February, 17 April, 1 May 1962.
6. *Argosy Weekly*, 24 January 1962.
7. Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 448.
8. *Ibid.*, II, 266, 454.
9. *Ibid.*, II, 450.
10. *Ibid.*, II, 445.
11. *United Churchman*, 23 May 1957; *Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Maritime Conference* (1957), 8-9, 40-1.
12. Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 284-6.
13. Policy committee report, in MAA, Minutes of Board of Regents, 1937-43, 275.
14. A fuller exposition of the analysis on which the arguments in this paragraph are based will be found in John G. Reid, *Mount Allison University: A Brief History* (Jolicure, N.B.: Anchorage, 1989).
15. See C.T. Bissell, ed., *Canada's Crisis in Higher Education: Proceedings of a Conference Held by the National Conference of Canadian Universities at Ottawa, November 12-14, 1956* (Ottawa: NCCU, 1957).
16. Paul Axelrod, "Higher Education, Utilitarianism, and the Acquisitive Society: Canada, 1930-1980," in Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Modern Canada, 1930-1980s: Readings in Canadian Social History, Volume 5* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 192. See also Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics, and the Universities of Ontario, 1945-1980* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982), passim.
17. Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars*, 23-5.
18. MAA, Minutes of Board of Regents, 1958-71, 15-16; MAA, Minutes of Executive Committee, 1957-62, 171-2.
19. Axelrod, "Higher Education, Utilitarianism, and the Acquisitive Society," 192.
20. Mount Allison Faculty Association, "Report on the Size of the Student Body," April 1959, MAA, 0106-5.
21. Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 292-3.
22. Ralph P. Bell, "Installation Address," *Mount Allison Record*, Winter 1960, 115; Editorial, *Ibid.*, Fall 1961.
23. Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 312-13; MAA, Interview with Alex Colville, 20 January 1982, 20-1.
24. Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 330-2.
25. MAA, "Brief to Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick, 1961," 4-5, 13, 26, and passim.
26. *Report of the Royal Commission on Higher Education in New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Government of New Brunswick, 1962), 100.
27. [Mount Allison University], "Comment on the Idea of Excellence at Mount Allison," ed. I. L. Campbell, W. B. Stallworthy, and R. A. Stanway, 45.
28. *Ibid.*, 100-01.
29. *Ibid.*, 66, 71.
30. *Ibid.*, 71
31. *Ibid.*, 14
32. *Argosy Weekly*, 22 March 1963.
33. See Reid, *Mount Allison University*, II, 333-4.
34. L.H. Cragg to Alex Colville, 6 September 1962, Minutes of Mount Allison Faculty Association.
35. MAA, Interview with Alex Colville, 20 January 1982, 18-19.
36. R. P. Bell to L. H. Cragg, 9 June 1966, MAA, L. H. Cragg Presidential Papers, 8024/3/20.
37. W. S. Godfrey to W. J. West, 17 February 1969, MAA, W. S. Godfrey Papers, 8646/2/7.

38. See *Mount Allison Record*, Autumn 1966, 12-13.
39. *Ibid.*, Spring/Summer 1974, 10-11.
40. *Argosy Weekly*, 25 January 1963.
41. *Ibid.*, 1 November 1963.
42. *Ibid.*, 11 November 1966.
43. K. B. Palmer to L. H. Cragg, 15 July 1964, MAA, Cragg Papers, 8024/2/27; MAA, President's Report, 1965-6, 62-3. On the opening of the chapel, see *United Churchman* (Sackville, N.B.), 27 October 1965.
44. W. S. Godfrey to W. J. West, 17 February 1969, MAA, Godfrey Papers, 8646/2/7.
45. See, for example, MAA, President's Report, 1968-9, 3; for examples of later controversies over the relationship between sports and academic excellence, see *Argosy Weekly*, 3, 10 November, 8 December 1975, 12 January 1976, 30 September 1982.
46. MAA, President's Report, 1973-4, Appendix, 17.
47. Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.
48. See *C.A.U.T. Bulletin*, 19, no. 1 (1970-1), 51-8.
49. *Calendars*, 1964-5, 1974-5. Those of professorial rank are taken to include assistant, associate, and full professors.
50. MAA, President's Report, 1969-70, 5-6; MAA, Minutes of Faculty Council, 1964-72, 120-1, 158-9, 170-81, 182-5, 186-9, 190-3; *Argosy Weekly*, 1 October 1973.
51. MAA, President's Report, 1973-4, 6.
52. *Argosy Weekly*, 22 March 1963.
53. "The Idea of Excellence at Mount Allison," 51; *Argosy Weekly*, 18 October 1963, 17 January 1964.
54. *Argosy Weekly*, 31 January 1964.
55. *Ibid.*, 7, 14, February 1964.
56. *Ibid.*, 13 February, 27 September, 11 October 1968.
57. *Ibid.*, 25 September 1964, 8 January 1965.
58. *Ibid.*, 26 January, 15 March 1968.
59. *Ibid.*, 13 February 1968; *Tribune-Post*, 15, 22 February 1968; Robert C. Read to Karl G. Slocumb, 26 September 1968, MAA, Godfrey Papers, 8646/2/6; W. S. Godfrey to R. E. Sewell, 28 January 1969, *ibid.*, 8646/2/7. On the withdrawal from C.U.S., see *Argosy Weekly*, 27 September, 6 December 1968.
60. Patricia Jasen, "In Pursuit of Human Values (or Laugh When You Say That): the Student Critique of the Arts Curriculum in the 1960s," in Paul Axelrod and John G. Reid, eds., *Youth, University, and Canadian Society: Essays in the Social History of Higher Education* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1989), 247-71.
61. *Argosy Weekly*, 26 February 1965, 13 November 1967.
62. *Ibid.*, 14 September 1969.
63. See *Mount Allison Record*, Winter 1970, 3-5; also W. S. Godfrey to D. H. E. Carlson, 11 March 1969, MAA, Godfrey Papers, 8646/2/7.
64. MAA, President's Report, 1971-2, 4-5.
65. *Argosy Weekly*, 17 September 1973.
66. *Ibid.*, 3 December 1971.
67. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1975.