

University Jubilees and University History Writing: A Challenging Relationship

Edited by Pieter Dhondt

Brill

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The celebrations of university jubilees provide rare opportunities for self-reflection. Through a familiar order of service, covering public lectures, ceremonies awarding honorary degrees to dignitaries and delegates from other universities, universities both celebrate their past, and affirm their future role. Histories of more or less substance are also commissioned under greater or lesser oversight. For the historian of universities, they are seductive moments when the university itself is the subject of discussion, but as this collection demonstrates, the reader must be aware of the wider context in which these histories are written.

This edited collection, the 13th volume in the series *Scientific and Learned Cultures and Their Institutions*, provides a number of examples of the way in which jubilee histories have been interpreted for contemporary purposes, even overshadowing differences within universities. Taking as its case studies, the jubilee celebrations of diverse universities from Central, Eastern and Northern Europe, the volume reveals a wide variety of responses.

One of the advantages of the variety of the European university sector, particularly marked when read from Australia, is that this provides a basis for analysis that considers the wider context of universities in their state and regional settings, and how their respective histories interact. The Editor, Pieter Dhont, illustrates this point by contrasting history of science with history of university, the former having more concern for epistemological questions than institutions.

In his concluding chapter, Dhont argues that often more critical methods used in the history of education can also help to reviving and develop the discipline of university history, and protect it from abuse by “policy makers” to “advance their own agendas”. Better history makes for more robust policy.

These themes are explored throughout the collection to a greater or lesser extent. It is particularly strong on the external influences on university jubilees, cutting across the studies of the individual institutions to examine broader questions of epistemology, politics and sociology. In this, the collection is helped by its European focus, and it is considering the period to the nineteenth and twentieth century. This gives it coherence and helps to overcome the more fundamental differences that may emerge from a wider scope.

The intrusion of politics is, perhaps not surprisingly, a key theme in this text. Marek Ďurčanský and Dhont provided a particularly poignant example of this in their study of Charles IV University, Prague, which had the misfortune of organising anniversaries in the midst of the 1848 revolution, and then in 1948 as Prague came under communist rule. Similarly, Trude Maurer shows how Russian anniversaries in the first decades of the twentieth century were variously prohibited, cancelled or postponed owing to political instability. In Anna-Maria Stann’s analysis of the University of Cluj, shifting borders produced different forms of memorialisation.



An interesting component of this is in both studies the role played by patriotic staff and students. Maurer shows Historian Friederich Meinecke attempting to organise patriotic celebration of the centenary of the War of Liberation. Ďurčanský and Dhont reveal the role of the student body, in 1848 organising amidst revolution organising the only celebration, and in 1948 censoring the university histories produced, a salient reminder that the Universities are their communities.

The vexed question of what a university's proper role should entail was taken up by Jorunn Sem Fure's study of the Royal Frederick University, Norway. Here, the familiar struggle between the support for research, and the university's cultural role, played out in the jubilee celebrations, as the various sides grappled over which tradition to highlight in official history.

A similar story emerges with Johan Ötling's analysis of the rediscovery of the writing of Alexander Humboldt during the centenary celebrations of the University of Berlin, to create a past for that institution for the purposes of the time – a "tradition" that was subsequently adopted for the purposes throughout the twentieth century.

The book also includes broader reflections on the particular methodological challenges of writing university history at a time of jubilee celebration. Again the collection benefits from variety, with Thomas Brandt's analysis of Trondheim University, an organisation comprised of two distinct predecessor organisations followed by Jonas Flöter's study of the challenges of writing a 600-year history of an institution as significant as the University of Leipzig. Emmanuelle Picard adds a different approach, compiling a database of staff at French Universities, in order to draw prosopographic conclusions, which offer the promise of original conclusions.

This book is a great pleasure to read. It makes good use of historical photographs and ephemera, and the reader is transported briskly from one party to the next. It is a fine contribution to the new criticism of European university history.

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Committed to Learning: A History of Education at the University of Melbourne

By Juliet Flesch

Miegunyah Press

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Being a part of the prestigious Miegunyah Press series, attached to Melbourne University Press, this publication is designed to recognise the establishment of the Faculty of Education at Melbourne in 1903; its struggle to maintain its place within the University for the next four decades; and its growing significance after the Second World War culminating in the recent emergence of the Graduate School of Education. The account is framed as a celebration of prominent staff over this period. As such it serves principally as a biographical register of academics in education at the University of Melbourne. While it does not give the intellectual and pedagogic history of the faculty that I was expecting, "Committed to Learning" does reveal certain trends in education as an academic discipline in Australia which will be of interest to other scholars in the history of education.

The opening sections focus on the colonial history of education in Victoria recognising the role of the state in the training of teachers including a college. This was of course in keeping with practice in Britain and its Empire of settlement. It was not until the last decades of the