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Dobson, William Arthur Charles Harvey

University of Toronto Library Oral History Project

**Interview with W. A. C. Dobson – interviewer: Paul Bator**

At 47 Queen's Park Crescent (2:17 to 3:55 p.m.), October 25, 1978

*Transcription from audio file by G. P. Keith*

**PB:** This is a University of Toronto Archives oral history interview with Professor W. A. C. [William Arthur Charles Harvey] Dobson, at 47 Queen's Park Crescent. The time is 2:17, and the interview is conducted by Paul Bator.

Professor Dobson, I wonder if you would be willing to tell us a little bit about your education and background, and how you came to the University of Toronto after the Second World War.

**WD:** Yes, I came to the University of Toronto in 1952, at the invitation of the then-president Sidney Smith. This happened in a very strange way. I was teaching at the time, at Oxford University, where I was the Professor of Chinese. And I had been there, teaching for five years, and prior to that, I was a student, an undergraduate at the University, with the intervention of the Second World War. And Sidney Smith came and called on me, to ask me about the possibility of starting Asian studies in Canada, which at that time virtually did not exist. And he did this because he had been at the Commonwealth conference of university presidents and vice-chancellors, which the British government convenes every three years. In 1952 they met in New Delhi. And he overheard at breakfast time a conversation between the vice-chancellor of Oxford and the vice-chancellor of Cambridge in which Cambridge was to offer me the professorship of Chinese. And my vice-chancellor said – came to a gentleman's agreement with them, because I was going to get the chair in five-years-time anyway. And, hearing this conversation, Sidney Smith, on his way back to Canada, came up to Oxford and essentially asked me if I would come to Canada and do precisely that here in Canada.

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I thought this proposal over very carefully, and consulted with all of my colleagues. I made it very clear to Sidney Smith that, since there was no tradition of Asian Studies, the commitment to him financially would be very considerable – at that time in something of the region of fifty thousand dollars to get a library started and so on. I also pointed out to him that getting personnel in these studies was exceedingly difficult since a very big thrust after the Second World War in these studies, being made in the United Kingdom and France, and in the United States, and personnel were extremely scarce. However, we discussed these problems, and he undertook to – undertook to raise the appropriate money, and do all he could to facilitate this.

The advice I got from my colleagues was that I shouldn't take these promises too seriously. And that an Australian colleague of mine said that colonials don't quite behave like the vice chancellor of Oxford University, and they promise you the earth to get you there, and they wouldn't get the – but my own judgment of Sidney Smith at the time was, he was an honest man, and that if he didn't – he didn't make good on his promises I could always go back to Oxford. This was firmly impressed on me, that I would be expected to return in five-years-time.

But I decided at the time that if I really went to the University of Toronto, really involved the persons in large expenditures that I was determined to stay in Canada for the rest of my life and see the project through. And I wouldn't simply use the University as a stepping stone to another professorship. But, on the other hand, if these dire warnings of unfulfilled promises were true, that I could always go back. And I think I'd rather like to say now that, I've now been in this University for twenty-seven years, and Sidney Smith, Claude Bissell, Moffat Woodside as acting President, and finally [John] Evans, have carried out those promises to the full, and I've never had any reason whatever to feel that I would wish to return to Oxford or to many other universities which I've been invited to go to. I would like that on record.

I must say that the first year, in 1952, getting the department started, really was one of the most tough assignments I've taken on. It had nothing to do with a lack of good-will, but it really was an extraordinarily difficult thing to get a department started, particularly

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as, in this university as opposed to most universities in the United States, where Chinese studies were well-developed – uh –

**PB:** If I may just interject. What was the status, if any, of Asian or Chinese Studies at the University? I understand Bishop White had –

**WD:** I was – I'm going to come to that.

**PB:** Oh, pardon me –

**WD:** One of the problems at this time was that places like Harvard – Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Berkeley and so on, Ancient Studies as such were almost entirely done at the graduate level. At that time the University of Toronto's principal emphasis, and the way departments were started was on an undergraduate level. And setting up a four-year's honours in Asian Studies was a very, very difficult commitment. Furthermore, there had been, um – there had been a beginning of sorts, done through the Canadian School of Missions, originally, to teach the Chinese language by missionaries, to intending missionaries which, under Bishop White, was incorporated into the University for about two years. But of course its academic standards were completely abysmal. And I think that the authorities at that time recognized this – recognized this was a false start.

At all events, from my point of view one had to set out the sort of curriculum that would ensure that any graduate from this university would get instant admission to graduate schools in the United States. And this meant bring up to the standards acceptable to – above all to Harvard.

My impressions of the University then – at that time – at least I can only recall what my impressions at that time were – I was coming from the University of Oxford which is conducted in a very, very different way. After all, Oxford teaches an elite, teaches a very, very small proportion of the population, has very, very long traditions, has great assurance about what it does. I was given complete freedom there. I had all the associations of a very distinguished college and its common room, and a very lively intellectual life, something

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very, very different to come to a university where the clientele is much more broadly based, where a distinction had to be made between honours students and pass students. But, my own impression at that time was that the top of the honours students were as good as anywhere else, but the rag-tag and bob-tail were pretty dismal. But then I found that's pretty true over most of North America anyway. So it didn't seem to me to be a terrible background. Because as far as our studies were concerned, we were only dealing with honour students –

**PB:** When you were – excuse me for interrupting again – when you first started teaching courses, what were the first courses you taught? Just wondering.

**WD:** The – when I first came here, there were students actually enrolled in Bishop White's missionary language program, and certain – certain instructors here. And that program was on such an appalling academic level that it simply had to be scrapped. And I introduced essentially exactly the same program that was pursued at Oxford. Which is – at Oxford itself is very much based on the program of the classical greats. That is to say, in the first two years a very intensive study of classical Chinese, and the third and fourth years' areas of specialization in literature, history, philosophy and the modern language. But we were very heavily classically based, because that is the basis of all serious studies. But the curriculum as it was first set out, was identical with that of Oxford University. In fact, we have since exchanged students at different levels. They've been absolutely no problem whatever. But anyway, that is the sort of criterion I set.

**PB:** I'm wondering, when you started to develop the staff, for example, what was your goal in terms of developing a group people who would be able to teach in this country?

**WD:** Well – I think one of the most difficult problems of all, was in getting – was in getting the staff together, because no one would come here for love or money, first of all. First of all, we didn't have the library facilities which would attract a scholar, and secondly we couldn't make them the same kind of offer that could make elsewhere at that time. And I did – I did

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manage to get one Canadian who was teaching at London University to come back here, but after a while it seemed to me that we would have to develop, for the time being one's own staff. And, accordingly, got hold of some people who had first-class honours in other, well-established disciplines like history and so on, and made an arrangement to engage them as lecturers on the condition that they would learn – learn Chinese, and then pursue their own disciplines within the field of Chinese Studies. And out of that – out of that program – three – three – the program was quite successful – three of those – the people who did that, are still teaching in the University. One was Professor [William G.] Saywell, who's now the Principal of Innis College. One was John [Stewart] Brownlee, who's now the Chairman of the Department of East Asian Studies<sup>1</sup>. One was [Christopher Douglas Craig] Priestley, who teaches in the Department of East Asian Studies. One was a man called [Alfred Harry Charles] Ward who also teaches in the Department today.

Well, with that nucleus, and gradually working through – working through that honours program, we finally began to produce some graduates and began to place them at Harvard and Yale, and built up *bona fides* as a department. In the meantime I also had to establish the *bona fides* as an academic exercise of Asian Studies. My colleagues in the rest of the University were totally unaware of exactly what was involved, and I think it had had a rather unpleasant experience of a missionary language school, which had no academic basis whatever. But at all events, this was simply a matter of personal advocacy and demonstrating this was a serious and proper discipline, and gradually it gained the confidence of the University. And so the department grew. It seemed to me that we ought not to, and I recommended to Sidney Smith and he agreed, that we ought not to engage in the whole gamut of Asian Studies, because the development in the rest of the world – it wasn't only Chinese Studies, out of an Iraq mission in Britain in 1949, the whole of the Middle East, India, the Far East, a whole bunch of critical languages, all came under review. A similar study by the Defense Department in the United States isolated three

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<sup>1</sup> The Department was known as the Department of East Asiatic Studies from its creation on 1 July 1948 until 1 July 1964, when it was renamed the Department of East Asian Studies. On 27 May 1971, it was divided into the Department of East Asian Studies and the Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies. The latter was dissolved on 30 June 1978.

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hundred critical languages which were not represented in any American university. And they were each financed by the Defense Department to engage in these things. But it seemed to me that the cautious way to proceed was to produce a first honours student in Chinese and then to add to that a Department of Japanese.

At the moment that we did that, and produced our first honours student in Japan – that's a development period of eight years – we should then get into Indian Studies. And, at the same time I tried to encourage, and certainly got – persuaded certain persons in England to come – the Near East Department, which at that time was almost entirely preoccupied with Biblical Studies, with a heavily theological cast, to get into modern Persian Studies, modern Arabic Studies, modern Turkish Studies, and brought over my own friend and colleague Professor [George Michael] Wickens, who began within the Department of Near Eastern Studies, and then broke off into Islamic Studies, which is now a department, independently on its own.

The Japanese program went extremely well. The Chinese program progressed. We were able to persuade a number of visiting professors to come here, which made up for a certain amount of lack of experience with local talent. That program has gone well. We've had several Rhodes Scholarships, I don't know how many Commonwealth Fellowships, which is a pretty good test, because that's submitting one's results to an international jury. It's bit of self-promotion, but we have been extraordinarily fortunate in the kind of graduates that we've produced. In this way I think we've established the *bona fides* of the department within the University.

**PB:** What was the – you've talked about the British Government's response and promotion, and also the American Government's promotion of Asian Studies – what was the role of the Canadian Government, if any, in the promotion of Asian Studies in this country during the fifties?

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**WD:** Having just come from the United Kingdom, where the Scarborough Royal Commission<sup>2</sup> had recommended to Mr. Antony Eden and got the response from the Treasury Board of a very considerable sum of financing, which – I've now forgotten the figure, but it was something like half a million pounds. And these were put into these terms in the United Kingdom. In the United States the figures were very, very much greater. At one time the Defense Department were offering, and in fact offered me, three million dollars to start any program in any one of three hundred critical languages. This is only the government intervention in the United States. The private initiative, of course, was just as great because the Americans seemed to catch on to this idea. The liveliness of their interest in the Far East anyway made the whole thing plausible to them. The only person in this country – I had to do a great deal of advocacy to various conferences of Canadian universities, to the Canadian government, friends, tried to draw the attention of the Canadian Government to the importance of these studies purely in the country's self-interest. Apparently External Affairs never showed the slightest interest. The Government of Canada have never contributed a penny, as far as I know, specifically to Asian Studies.

And I would like to remark here that, as we developed expertise, as we developed expertise on the Near East, on the Far East, and upon India, which we added later, of course – and the Department of Indian and Sanskrit Studies became a separate department, requiring considerable expertise – at no time has the Government of Indian Studies Department at External Affairs ever consulted any of these people. Some of them are world experts in their field. Even I myself have been consulted by the State Department, never by the Department of External Affairs in my own country. This is a part of the sort of lassitude in which one had to develop these studies.

On the other hand I always got the warmest support from the presidents of the University. I think it's very much to the credit of the University of Toronto, if not to the

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<sup>2</sup> Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Facilities for Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies, chaired by the Earl of Scarborough, 1945

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Government of Canada, that this very expensive and large, new development was financed entirely out of its own budget, out of its own recurring funds, whereas every other university were drawing largely on Government's subventions and foundation funds. But once again, I simply have to say, that is no credit is due to the Government of Canada, or the Provincial Government. All credit is due to the presidents of the universities, who carried on regardless of this disinterest by the Government.

One thing I must put on record was that Sidney Smith and I did manage to raise from the Carnegie Corporation fifty thousand dollars to start, to make our first inroads on building up the library. The library was a problem because the Royal Ontario Museum had a library of sorts. It's very difficult to describe to someone who is not a scholar within the field, what a bibliophile collection collected by a nineteenth century scholar as a museum object might be, and a working library might be. They're entirely different things. But at least that was all we had to begin with. I ran into a great deal of rivalry between the Royal Ontario Museum, and a complete lack of cooperation on their part with the Department, which at first was housed, because of the shortage of accommodation, within the museum. We were in the museum but not a part of it, and that was not a very happy arrangement. Fortunately we were able to move out, to accommodation, first on Wilcox Street, then in Queen's Park Crescent [sic, just "Queen's Park"] in the old President's House, and finally in Sidney Smith Hall.

You want to stop the tape for a moment?

As far as the Board of Governors were concerned – I knew several of them personally, particularly Mr. Walter Gordon, Mr. Eric Phillips, and so on – and I never had anything but – any suspicion that I had anything but the fullest support from them. When I mean support, I really mean that the whole of the – the development of this department was done entirely out of the recurring budget, which certainly could not be done without their full cooperation and support. There was no outside funding at all in this enterprise.

One other – apart from founding the department itself, it seemed to me, as one looked into the future, that what one might call Third World studies – Latin American studies, the African world, the Near East, the Middle East, the Far East – all the studies which traditionally didn't form part of the traditional didn't form a part of the curriculum

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of a university before the Second World war – that gradually departments like ourselves should be represented among the disciplinary departments. And I did a great deal of advocacy in the Department of Political Economy and the Department of History and so on, to assume their role in the development of these studies. And, I must say that that was extraordinarily slow work, and they were very slow to take this on, but as the years have progressed they have in fact done that. And, the extent of Third World Studies, of Asian Studies in particular – it's not confined to East Asian Studies now. It extends right across the departments of the University, which is rather a gratifying and proper development.

**PB:** You were going to talk – to tell us about your impression of the Deans, during the fifties and sixties –

**WD:** Ah, yes. My relations to the deans were – were – with Dean Woodside were very close indeed. I have to say, he was a very close personal friend, quite apart from anywhere else. But also, they were firmly committed to the importance of developing these new studies. I think as a classicist himself, he understood that Classical Studies were not going to hold the pre-eminence in the future for bright and intelligent young scholars. And that the new fields of Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese, were going to be the really challenging areas, and I had every conceivable type of support both officially and personally, and he and I, right up to his death, were very close friends and confidants, and my relations were extremely warm.

At that time the relations generally within the University were far more personal, far more close, and from my point-of-view far more rewarding, than they subsequently came to be. Because under Sidney Smith, the chairmen of departments – it has a great deal to do with Sidney Smith's personality – but he was very loyal to his chairmen of departments, and we met as a group quite regularly, and particularly after the Senate meeting, each month in someone's home, informally, and in social gatherings. And I had a very strong feeling of a very broad consensus about what the University was about, what its standards should be, what it should be doing. And this, I must say, this was an extremely encouraging – an encouraging feature of coming to this university, of not being made to

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feel like an outsider, but being made to feel very much a part, and to be able to identify with the institution, with a real loyalty and warmth which was returned by one's colleagues.

That – under Claude Bissell I had also very close relations – he was the very first friend I ever had in this country, and as the Dean of University College he went out of his way to make myself and my family welcome. So when he became President the same cordial relations existed. However, at that time the University – a period of expansion – there was very much a loosening of this sort of bond, a central core consensus. As the University became bigger and more impersonal, I really lost the sort of sense of cohesion we had understood earlier. And with Dean [Vincent Wheeler] Bladen I must confess I never had anything like the same relationships, or even confidence. I found – I never found myself at loggerheads with him. Our disputes were always conducted in a very gentlemanly manner. There was no acrimony about it. But I thought he was very unwise in – at a time when money was comparatively easy to get – in his energies in stockpiling really rather second-rate people, and in fact wishing on my department people that I myself would never have appointed. And certain of those people have become a major embarrassment to the University ever since, and of course having got tenure, couldn't be dismissed.

I found Bladen's failure to understand the problem, not motivated by any personal animosity. It was simply not understanding the problem, mistakenly thinking that I was far too conservative, and far too cautious. In fact I was being extremely careful, because in a new subject you can't afford to be this kind of – unwise. And he made, over my better judgment, several rather bad appointments. And, one of the subsequent results of that bad judgment was that the Department of Sanskrit Studies and Indian Studies no longer exists because of the personal incompatibility – I would almost say incapacity – of all the people appointed by Bladen.

At all events, by that period, by 1964, I had been head of the Department for twelve years, and having seen Chinese Studies, Japanese Studies, Sanskrit Studies, and at a remove Islamic Studies, firmly launched, and because of the sort of interference that I was getting from Dean Bladen, I tendered my resignation to the University.

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**PB:** If I could – what, in terms of numbers, just to give us the idea – what was the size of the department on your leaving in 1964? How many students, graduate students, members of faculty?

**WD:** At the time of my resignation, I suppose we had about a faculty of seventeen or eighteen, and a student body of a hundred or a hundred and twenty, though I can't be quite certain of those figures. They're certainly very much larger now.

At the point at which I resigned, I had followed the policy of – during my twelve years as head of the Department – the policy of leaving the faculty all the leisure from teaching – giving them all of the leisure they could, and encouraging them, engaging in research. They – rather prodded I think – well, certainly prodded by Bladen – felt that the department should be run by a series of committees and so on. And the height of absurdity was reached when they formed a committee to decide how the hundred and twenty dollars, which was the appropriation for stationery for the year [should be spent]. At that point I felt that I could much more profitably get on with my own scholarly work. I must say that during those first twelve years I sat on every committee in the University – the Executive Committee of the Senate, I was a member of the Senate, member of the Faculty of Arts, head of the MA Committee, on the Executive Committee of the Graduate School. I did my full stint of administration. But this was very much at the cost of my scholarly work. I do happen to be a very productive scholar. And, this burden was partly mitigated for me by the fact that I was able to put in all of my administrative work between Labour Day and June, and spend the summer in Georgian Bay, and was able – at very great sacrifice to myself – I was working something like seventeen or eighteen hours a day – to get out the books that I certainly had to get out as my contribution to the learned world. I wasn't dissatisfied so much with that, as the sheer futility of interference, and the sort of things which I felt were damaging my own *amour propre* in the University. So I resigned.

Bissell's reaction immediately was that I shouldn't leave the University. He certainly didn't want that. And, what do you want to do? And I said I would like to teach, because I don't find teaching students a burden. In fact it's a complete pleasure. I must get on with my own work. And – but I would not have anything more to do with the

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administration. After twelve years as head of a department, I'd had administration right up to the neck. And, as I say, the whole atmosphere of the university changed between 1952 and 1964. And committees were proliferating, becoming more and more exasperating, more and more fruitless in my view, and really a waste of time.

**PB:** What do you see – this seems to be a conflict, I know, in a scholar's life – definitely when one is at an institution like the university – between the roles of administrator of the department – and it of course it's a very important part in scholarship. Is that a constant problem, or do you think that could be solved by perhaps changing the structure of the University? Or should there be, for example, administrators? Is there a way out of this problem that you've been pointing out?

**WD:** I have two views about this. One, which I discussed at great length with Robin Ross – a great deal of the administration that we were doing, was not really decision making, was not really executive decisions. It was not at that kind of level, but on a very much lower level of paperwork. And it seemed to me that the University could, under a man as experienced as Robin Ross, who, after all served in the British civil service and Treasury and so on, that a core of administrators could do much of the mechanical administration, provided that the academic staff did the decision-making on matters of professional concern. I still think that to be the case. What I found was, that committees were increasingly engaging themselves in seeing that the regulations were carried out, instead framing the regulations and then giving them to civil servants to carry out. I think there was a total confusion there between the two roles – one, the decision-making role, who really made decisions, really had the authority, and who actually did the donkey work. And the donkey work was becoming increasingly burdensome.

The second point I would like to make was – my attitude towards this, as a scholar, and I suppose, in terms of published work – I have after all published eight books and something like seventy learned articles – that my only attitude towards this, is a sense of public duty – does it devolve upon a scholar to take part in the decision-making process of the University, to play his part in the administration, which I was perfectly happy to do,

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provided of course, that – at least his sense of public duty on the one hand, plus his sense of duty to his subject. One has to strike a balance. I could never sympathize with people who felt so pure, so scholarly they should be relieved of all responsibility whatever. I simply don't believe that works. But, I think that the administration, properly defined, and the proper orientation of a professor, the balance he draws between apportioning his time, is a personal matter.

This seemed to be getting more and more confused. And it seemed to me too many members of the faculty were more concerned about their pensions than about the standards being preserved in this University. Particularly, in this whole imbroglio, it seemed to me, coming from Oxford, where students are very carefully taken care of, and given great prominence, that above all students were, really, suffering most from this gradual bureaucratization of the University. I had great sympathy with all the student protests of those years. I thought they got rather a raw deal.

When I first came here, in the old system, in the third and fourth year the students got quite a lot of individual attention, and were taken quite seriously. The way the University has deteriorated now, I think the students don't get anything like the deal they should.

**PB:** Just to expand on that, what was your reaction – these were your formative years, or coming out years of the Faculty Association – what has your response been to the Faculty Association?

**WD:** My response to the Faculty Association – this is purely a personal view – they bored me to tears. This was a bit of administration I really couldn't care about. They seemed to me only to be concerned about their pensions and so on. I'm just about to go on pension myself, so I suppose I should appreciate their efforts, but it seemed very low on the order of priorities, so I didn't take the slightest interest in the Faculty Association.

**PB:** If we can return to what we were mentioning earlier, when you decided to leave the chairmanship of the Department – and your decision to –

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**WD:** Oh yes. When I handed in my resignation and was asked by President Bissell to continue, that period coincided with the setting up of Massey College. And at – on the invitation of Vincent Massey, I was made a senior fellow of Massey College. And I moved from the Department into Massey College, and found there, first of all a physical detachment from the – what one might call the administration, and the sort of leisure in which I could teach and do my own scholarly work.

But I got increasingly involved in the mess of the College, and – I was a senior fellow there for ten years. Once again, I must confess, that my participation in the College came more out of a sense of duty than a sense of preference. But since Vincent Massey had asked me – and at that time I think I was the only member of the Senior Common Room at Massey College who'd actually been a member of a Senior Common Room at Oxford. And as Massey – Vincent Massey's ideal of what Massey College should be, was based, in fact statutorily based on Baliol College at Oxford – he and I were quite close – had a very clear idea of exactly what the role of the senior fellow should be.

**PB:** I'm just wondering, were you actually in on the planning of Massey College itself?

**WD:** No.

**PB:** When did Vincent Massey consult you, or did you go to him?

**WD:** Well, you see, in the first two or three years of the opening of the College, Vincent was there all the time. He had rooms just below me. There were two roles, it seemed to me, that I could play in the College without too much interruption of my own scholarly work. One was the sort of personal relation with the students, to which I was quite accustomed, which was after all the genius of the Oxford system. This I found very congenial. I found it very easy to talk to students, and they found it very easy to come talk to me about their problems. That I found quite rewarding. But I had to be very careful that it didn't intrude too much on my scholarly time.

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The other really arose out of a comment – a conversation I had had with Walter Gordon when I first came here. I'd known Walter Gordon before I came to Canada. And when I had been here for three weeks, he asked me immediately before my ideas got too settled, what I thought about the University of Toronto and what was going on.

And I said the thing that surprised me most, coming from Oxford and being – eating dinner every evening with two cabinet ministers – was the failure to participate in the public life of the academic body. In fact, in the first three weeks it was wholly impressed on me at that time that professors did not get involved, and people like the Board of Governors, did not get involved with people in Bay Street, and kept out of public life, kept out of politics. In fact they rather regarded themselves as a sort of race apart, and a rather persecuted minority, but taking a certain amount of virtue in their detachment. This seemed to be absolute nonsense. And having, as I say, just come from a university in which every political party had really deep roots, every government department had deep roots in which the intellectual elite, I suppose you might call it – that's supposed to be bad word now; I don't know why; hockey players have elites, I don't see why scholars shouldn't – but at all events there was a constant feed-in and feedback between the government of the UK and the two major universities to the benefit of both. I found that totally absent here and I found that very strange.

Gordon agreed with me and said it hadn't occurred to him, and I believe as Finance Minister he did a great deal to try and correct that lack. That was my impression at that time. So when I went to Massey College, I suggested to Vincent Massey that we use the senior common room as a sort of meeting place for leaders in the business life, leaders in political life, particularly people in Ottawa, deputy ministers and politicians, and so on, to meet with the academic body in a little pleasant dinner, and good conversation afterwards, and that we should get a sort of meeting of minds. Also, of course, in the process, raising the esteem of the university. And since then the university have conducted the common room with very considerable success for a number of years.

**PB:** Could you give us an idea of the social engagements or intercourse that took place between academics and government in the senior common room?

**WD:** In the senior common room, once a week I invited something like six or seven people from the public life. I can't recall all the names, but I suppose anyone that one might have called an opinion-former at that time was invited at some time. Plus the presidents of a number of major companies. As I say, it's difficult to recall names, but a number of cabinet ministers, a great many people. This was very agreeable to Mr. Massey. It was very much his idea of what a college should do. It made a great many friends for the University. I think people in the public life were a little surprised that the University should take any notice of them, and were extremely forthcoming.

My real problems began with Master of Massey College, whom was appointed by Mr. Vincent Massey. It always struck me, knowing the Oxford system so well, that this was a very bad appointment, and I must say quite frankly I'm quite persuaded it was. I don't think – well, certainly Robertson Davies is certainly not a scholar. He's an actor marquee, he a playwright. He writes funny books. But that's no qualification for running a college, especially for graduate students. His idea of a college, it seemed to be, rather drawn from, certainly not personal experience of how a college should be run, but from the sort of country troupe playing "Charlie's Aunt", because all the trappings of Oxford colleges, which are really not very relevant to the enterprise, he most sedulously cultivated, but missed most of its genius.

At all events, I found myself increasingly at odds with Robertson Davies, mainly in defending students because his whole attitude was authoritarian. He was quite arch with his students. The first nine years that I was there, the students were in constant conflict with Davies personally, and I found myself very much in the middle, and very much sympathizing with the students.

At all events, I finally left Massey College, not I must say with very much regret, because these kinds of extracurricular activities were very much – very demanding on one's energy and time, and I really wanted to get on with my own scholarly work. Since then, I've been lucky enough to have this office here at 47 Queen's Park Crescent. The one condition I made when I resigned as head of the department, was that my secretary who has typed all of my books and has a knowledge of the way that I work, it would be

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impossible to train anyone else to do – that she should stay with me, and the University has maintained that despite very severe financial stringency. And I've been very happily and productively employed here at Queen's Park Crescent ever since. I may say that my secretary has been with me for nineteen years, and one of more happy associations I've had with the University, that I could find someone so diligent and so devoted and so skilled and accurate in the typing of what are after all very difficult manuscripts.

**PB:** One area that I would like to get into, is just to go back to – we've talked about the University and Department – but the reaction of the Canadian university community, during the fifties and sixties, to the new proposals to build up a specialized program like Asian Studies.

**WD:** One of the duties that I conceived during the headship of my department was to participate in the annual conferences of the Royal Society of the Canadian Association of Colleges and Universities, in a program of advocacy that Asian studies should be spread over the whole of Canada, not the whole burden borne by one university. It seemed to be healthy that this should be so. In this, Professor Wickens joined me and I think you'll find on the record various speeches we made on this sort of subject.

The response was not, I must say, was not terribly encouraging. What we really had hoped – we modelled on the Royal Report of Britain<sup>3</sup>, which recognized the enormity of the task, and were able to get universities to agree to a division of the labor. So that Oxford did certain things, Cambridge only did certain things, and the other – London University only did certain things. This seemed to me to make eminent sense, because the duplication of very, very scarce resource materials all over the place. However we were very unsuccessful at that, because the first thing that. My first insight into Canadian politics was that provincial rivalry precluded any kind of cooperation of this kind.

The first thing that the University of British Columbia did was to spend a great deal of money on acquiring almost exactly the same library that we acquired, and to start a

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<sup>3</sup> The report (1963) of the Committee on Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins.

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Chinese Department, whereas it would have been – and McGill did the same – whereas it would have been very much to the advantage of all three if one had taken on one major area and been really good at it, and the other had taken on another area and been very good at it, and we could have spread it around a bit. But, however – however cold the response was at first, gradually, as I look around the country, these studies are established in the smaller universities too. Even some of our graduates are teaching at Waterloo, at Western, and Windsor and so on. So, that growth was very much like casting one's bread to spread on the waters. It was surprising how many days it took to return, but eventually it did return in the form which we hoped.

One of the things that always concerned me was that our own Asian Studies programme here should not get really out of line with the very major developments in the United States and in the United Kingdom. Fortunately, because of my own personal reputation, I was able to maintain very close relations with the major American universities, and therefore able to place, with no problem at all, my own graduate students in prestigious universities. My own connection – external connections – were particularly with Harvard University on which I served its Visiting Committee for nine years, and had very, very close relationships with Harvard, are hopefully to their benefit but certainly to ours. It seemed to me that the performances that we put out at University of Toronto ensured that we measured up to the very best American universities, and I think on the whole we have maintained those standards. Otherwise we would never have gotten the Rhodes Scholarships and Commonwealth Fellowships and the number of people that we passed on to Harvard at the same time.

Perhaps I should say this: that in my view we've never had enough people of calibre here – of real calibre – to have a complete PhD program. Although I've been overruled in this, I've felt this very strongly for a long time, that our greatest service to Canadian students would be to give them a very sound undergraduate education, and instead of simply going on in this incestuous form, expose them to larger departments, larger experiences, and better qualified people. But we do now have a PhD program which I must say bears a certain amount of reasonable hesitation.

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I, also, was for so many years on a consultative committee, set up by the Carnegie Corporation, the Rockefeller Corporation, and the Ford Foundation, and particularly with the American Council of Learned Societies. I sat on that council for a number of years, which gave Canadian representation on four very large fund-granting organizations – I think very much to the benefit this country. I also sat on the Canada Council for – I was on the executive panel on the Canadian National commission to UNESCO. I represented Canada at the UNESCO general meeting, for three meetings in a row, always with the idea of ensuring that our department kept abreast of developments generally in the learned world and didn't grow in on itself, and revert back into being another language school for missionaries.

What else do you want me to say?

**PB:** It really comes down to some general observations. You've certainly given us that throughout the interview. But perhaps, the questions at the end, here, about your past role and the future one of specialized programs like East Asian Studies. Where do you see your department going, or the program?

**WD:** Well, if I can talk about Chinese Studies in the context of Asian Studies, and Asian Studies in the context of Third World Studies – by which I mean Latin American Studies, Africa, the Third World, the Middle East – all of these studies have a very shallow, a very short history in the West. It's surely, very, very – even the Soviet Studies don't date back much before the Second World War – and surely as the century progresses, the importance of these countries becomes increasingly important. We're now a part of one world, and the preoccupation of the Western world with ourselves must surely expand and our intellectual horizons gradually broaden. So it seems to me that eventually these studies, which are now rather specialized studies, thought rather *recherchez*, rather odd – should become part of the general education. It seems to me extraordinary that a high school curriculum should be so, narcissistically if you wish, concentrated on, first of all Canada, then the United States, then perhaps Britain, then perhaps a little bit of Europe. It seems to me that a whole world view of history and geography, of education in general should be much more

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universal. And therefore I think these studies are a sort of pilot project. They're producing a kind of expertise, producing a kind of infrastructure which will make this kind of education possible.

I also very, very strongly feel – I'm very disappointed that this didn't happen – that when Maurice Strong was first appointed to supervision of our foreign aid program – that I did suggest to him that ten percent of Canada's foreign aid might be reinvested in its universities to train the kind of expertise which would enable us to spend our money far more wisely than we do. And this, of course, is not simply a question of giving away. It's giving away money wisely, and giving away money wisely in these exotic parts of the world needs considerable expertise in the inward politics of the country and its customs and its habits and so on. And I think we could have done ourselves a great deal of good. However once again I found a very unresponsive federal government to a claim as seemingly idealistic as that, though it seemed to me to make eminent practical sense.

**PB:** We're almost out of tape on this side. There are one or two questions I'd like to continue with on the other side. The time is now 4:22. [This is an error: it was 3:22] We're stopping the tape.

This is reel number two of the University of Toronto Archives oral history interview with Professor W.A.C. Dobson at 47 Queen's Park Crescent. The date is October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1978, and the time is 3:28. We were just talking, Professor Dobson, of the role of the university in modern society. And you definitely have some very strong ideas about that, the role of the scholar particularly. Would you share some of those ideas for us?

**WD:** Well, perhaps it's because I'm a child of the Old World, although I've been in the New World for 27 years, but I am much more conscious of history than I think most of my colleagues are. And it seems to me that the centrality of the intellectual has been absolutely crucial. I mean, one simply can't understand the history of social history, intellectual history, without seeing certain key figures predominate the whole world of ideas, the whole world of science, and had their logical place within – society institutionalizes them in

universities. I don't mean that no one outside the university thinks, but this is the proper place for the generation of these sort of informing ideas.

Today, it seems to me that, at least in this university, that pedagogy – people talk about academic, they don't talk about intellectual, they don't talk about – they talk about mostly as though they were simply pedants. Scholarship is frequently simply pedantic. One doesn't see exceptional understanding – exceptions – really opinion-forming scholarship coming out of the universities and certainly feeding into the government and the public life. The policy of newspapers in this country is a very good example. In my own field, from time to time, people like myself, John Fairbank at Harvard, Eddie [Edwin O.] Reischauer at Harvard, we have felt compelled – it's not our subject – to make statements about public policy toward, for example, toward China, advocates for the recognition of Communist China. This is the sort of part, I think, that people like ourselves could play. But I regret that it happens so infrequently.

I also – I also can't help feeling that this sort of fiction that's maintained in this country, that every provincial university is as good as every other, is sheer nonsense. The Americans certainly don't believe that. No one thinks that Jesus College function junction and Harvard MA's are the same. I don't see why we can't simply recognize that we do need a national university of more than provincial status. I think the University of Toronto could easily become that. Although the political situation is not propitious for it to do. But in theory at least, it certainly could be granted. I don't see why it couldn't become as influential as Oxford. But it would very much have to change its procedures and standards. I see all the political difficulties of doing it, but it's just regrettable that it doesn't, because it doesn't play the kind of role I think a good university should play.

In one sense, you know, in the colonial period it didn't matter. No one minded that Australia had no graduate studies, because everyone went to England. But that was very long ago. We're now in a very, very different world. The Western world is not predominant now. We're now in a period of the hegemony of three superpowers, Soviet Union, the United States, but also China. This hasn't entered general wisdom yet, but it certainly is. And the challenge in the future, now that the Western world is no longer predominant in playing the game on its own terms, the challenge is essentially an intellectual one, and I'm

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very, very concerned. It is the role of the university to produce that kind of intellectualism, that kind of – not only in science, not only in engineering, though they're extremely important, but in the social sciences and the humanities – that sort of intellectual supremacy would enable us to cope with the competition, because, I'm very, very conscious that something of this kind of intellectual effort is being made in the Soviet Union, but a great deal in China. The Chinese are historically conditioned to the idea that salvation comes through learning. And as I watched the – after the excesses of the first decade of the communist rule, they're going back now to traditional education – the efforts that they make are, to me, are frightening, and this is the kind of China we're going to face in the future. And if we don't develop the kind of brains, the kind of intellectual entrepreneurship to cope with this thing, we're going to go under.

Is that what you wanted me to say?

**PB:** Yes, that's – just, just – your concept of the university, what you've seen happen to Canadian universities in the last decade, the last two decades – why do you think that's happened?

**WD:** I don't know. I can't speculate on why it's happened. I can simply observe from my own experience that it has happened. As I say, when I came here twenty-seven years ago, there was a tremendous sense of cohesion in the University. Within two or three years, I reckoned to know almost everybody in the University, and certainly all of the productive scholars, we were known to each other. There was a sort of common purpose. We had – however much the word might be unpopular – an elite of students that one could be very proud of. We got more Rhodes Scholarships than anybody else, we got more Woodrow Wilson Scholarships than anybody else. We did produce what we were supposed to be producing.

What has happened I think, is that cohesion has broken down. It's partly because of personality, partly the result of a very unwise reaction to Sputnik – of unwise, of unthought-out expansion. I don't mean that we shouldn't expand, but I think expanded in absolutely the wrong way. Uh –

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**PB:** Excuse me. What was the wrong way of our expansion?

**WD:** Pardon?

**PB:** What – you say we expanded the wrong way – the University. What exactly?

**WD:** Well, I think the multiplication of colleges like Erindale and Scarborough for example, and education on that kind of level, on the pass degree level, pushing the student body out to forty thousand, was a dissipation of our resources. I would much rather see our expansion go toward a university of roughly the size it was when I first came here, which had about six thousand students, and producing real quality. I think the role of places like Erindale and Scarborough could have been taken over by smaller universities and more underprivileged provinces. I don't mean that they should be taken out of the educational system, but I don't think that the University of Toronto should be watered down to respond to that kind of need. When this is done at the expense of using highly valuable men to teach third-rate students, this is rather silly. The emphasis – so, and particularly in the last few years – has gone out of research completely, and I mean not just silly, niggling research, but I mean really serious research.

It ought to be possible for this University to stand up, as Harvard is quite prepared to do, to stand up to a Visiting Committee, which it has, of scholars from outside of Harvard, not involved with Harvard at all, and stand up to an annual examination of what its strong points are, what its weak points are, and to heed that kind of advice. I think the University should be able to stand up to that, and it should be able to say where its points of strength lie, not this matter of self-advertisement, not coming from within the advocacy of the University itself, but from the scholarly world at large.

The impersonality of the University is now so great that I've never had any conversation with the last president of any kind and I don't think there's much all that special about me, but I have been a very devoted servant of this university, and a scholar of some reputation. But I haven't had a single word with the President, and I haven't the first idea what the Dean's first name is. I haven't met the last three Deans at all. When the

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University that goes down to that kind of fragmentation, it's become something other than the university I came to twenty-seven years ago.

**PB:** Just – we're coming to the end of the interview now. I find your original thoughts very provocative. What should be the role of a public institution like the university, which at University of Toronto has really come through financing? And this seems to be the quandary of the university is in now. It bases its enrollment – I should say it bases its financing on its enrollment.

**WD:** Well, you know, let's face it, so does Berkeley. In real terms so does the University of Oxford. However wealthy Oxford's endowments were between the two wars, in terms of inflation plus the cost of everything, the input from the university itself is very small. It too, and its students, they are certainly now almost entirely state supported. I don't see that the fact that we're a public institution – University of Paris after all is a public institution – I don't see that that militates against the kind of university I think we should have. I don't think there are people who – the people who provide the money should dictate the kind of institution.

I think the people who know how the institution should be run should dictate that. And they should so play their politics and the discourses skilled at – skilled polity [?], an education of the public away from the idea that they should dictate to the university, that it should become – that research should become mission-oriented research, that the courses should become job-oriented and so on. The sort of tail is wagging the dog at the moment. This is – this comes from, if you take other universities where this doesn't happen – this comes from poor – the case is simply being poorly made.

**PB:** By whom?

**WD:** By the University.

**PB:** Now, who in the University? Are we talking about the professors in general?

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**WD:** Yes. I think the faculty here have been – as I told you, I was told when I first came here, the tradition is, that you don't take part in public life, you don't get involved in Bay Street, you don't get involved. You just mind your own business, you know, you don't poke in – the silly remark Robertson Davies made about secretaries. It's an orientation. Perhaps it didn't matter twenty-seven years ago. I think it did – I thought so and so at that time. Twenty-seven years later, one sees how very much it matters, because look at the situation we've got ourselves into. We're not an autonomous university. We're being dictated to by Queen's Park. By who? By civil servants? Why should that be? That's ridiculous.

**PB:** Your view of scholarship, then, is very predicated on its involvement in the world and, you don't for instance tell people that we should have people teaching undergraduates and then we should have people doing serious scholarship. And that they could –

**WD:** That to me is total nonsense. It depends what level you think you're teaching at. If you think that a general arts course is just another four years of high school, that produce pedagogues and pedants and people who teach, then form academies and let people do research. If you're talking about a university, if you're talking about taking people out of the high school situation and putting them into an adult intellectual environment, you've got to be talking to adult, intellectual people.

I don't see this dichotomy between research and teaching. I don't see the dichotomy between public involvement and private research. I've talked about the various public duties I've undertaken in this country. I still hold a commission in the Canadian Army, for example. My own private research is as recondite as it could be. I'm a leading authority on the Chinese language, which could hardly be called mission-oriented research, or even likely lead anyone to a job. But I'm also involved in a kind of research, which is very exacting, which produces a kind of intellectuality. It doesn't mean I'm not interested in what's going on about me. I don't see a contradiction in the two things.

It seems to me that the views of any learned man are valid. Northrop Frye has a very distinguished position in the world of English literary criticism. He also has some

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extremely intelligent things to say about Quebec separatism. At least he has something very intellectually expressed to say about it. He has views about public life. Why not? He's intellectual. He's a very intelligent man. His research – he doesn't do his research in public, but he has a very informed opinion. This has to do how you conceive of the products of the university: are they educated men or technicians? If they are educated men, they should be informing – but furthermore the whole realm of knowledge throughout the world is advancing at such a rate – one of the roles of the intellectuals in the university is to keep the rest of this society in touch with what's going on in the outside world.

If this present restraint on medical research, for example, goes on much longer, we shall actually be out of touch with medical research in the United States. You know? It's very, very severe consequence. Now, I see absolutely no contradiction between, or dichotomy anyway between, either you do research or you – either you engage in the public life or you withdraw totally from it. It seems to me that the well-rounded citizen should be able to do all four, and probably be better at doing all four than anybody who just teaches. Could you imagine someone at the university level who just teaches? What's teaching? He's only regurgitating other people's work. He's not teaching, he's not setting people alive. He's just a pedagogue.

Does that answer your question?

**PB:** It does. Well, thank-you very much Professor Dobson. I wish we could talk for many hours.

**WD:** I don't mind. Is there anything we haven't covered?

**PB:** You've talked about the Presidents. You've talked about President Smith, we've talked about President Bissell. The one thing I would like to ask you – you just briefly talked about – of course the student revolt in the nineteen-sixties and later sixties here and later seventies here at the University. What kind of perspective would you put on that?

**WD:** Well, I'm not a very good to talk to about that, because in the past twenty-seven years I've had very good students. Of course, I'm in a subject where you don't even get to my courses

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unless you're highly motivated, and fairly bright. So the kind of students that I teach, I don't see any difference from now between students in 1952 and students today. But they are a very special kind of person. What I do wonder about is whether people in other departments are getting the same deal in 1978 that they got in 1952. I'm sure that they don't.

That's one thing. The other thing I've found that's absolutely deplorable, is that the media and politicians have created a sort of consensus among young people of university as a pointless exercise. Some of the brightest people, young kids that I talk to, have the very dimmest view of the University.

Now, is this the students' fault? I doubt it. The noisy, the silly ones, the clamorous ones, the ones that get so much publicity, I really wonder whether they should really have been here at all. I really wonder about the fate of the others, the kind of deal they get. I don't really see anything wrong with the type of students, at least the ones I meet. I do see a great disparity in terms of the kind of deal they get. But this is a malaisant society. I think it's extraordinary that the University hasn't cultivated the press better. I think it's extraordinary that the press is in such dismal hands. The qualifications of the average reporter in this country is appalling. One thinks of the *Manchester Guardian* and *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Le Monde*. See it's the quality of journalism. Surely an intellectual in this elite could have created a climate in which newspapers were simply forced into a slightly better standard than they do observe.

Why do we have to take all of these papers to be informed? I'm not informed by the [*Toronto*] *Star* and the *Globe and Mail*. I read them in about two minutes, because the trivia is so great. But I really have to take the *New York Review of Books*, *The Listener*, the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* which is now combined with the *Washington Post*, simply to keep me informed, and sometimes to keep informed of what's going on in Canada, which is very strange. All that kind of decline – I'm not even sure if it's always been true in this country, because I recall during the War that the *Winnipeg Free Press* was very frequently quoted all over the world. It was a paper of stature. We don't have a paper that anyone wants to quote any longer. And this contrives to create a society in which kids have a strange fear of the University, and I must say I don't think the faculty of this university

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have done very much wish to correct that view. I really don't think they have. They're worrying about their pensions. I think it's rather dismal.

What else did you want me to say?

**PB:** I think you've probably covered a good deal. Is there anything you would like to say? Looking on back of twenty-seven years at the University of Toronto – the plus and minus, so to speak.

**WD:** Okay, well, I'm now sixty-five, and in my last year, having spent twenty-seven years here, I've been very happy here. I've never been personally frustrated in anything I want to do. I've had complete liberty. I think I've used that liberty well. I've always managed to find the resources I need to carry out on the work I've done. I've no personal complaints. I've also enjoyed living in Canada. I feel completely identified with the country now, partly because this university does allow me to live up at Georgian Bay four months of the year and do what I want to do, which I don't think any other university would offer me quite that. So, personally these have been twenty-seven very happy, very fulfilling, satisfying years for me.

The frustration, I find, is that I haven't been able to play a role in the University, because the conditions aren't such that I feel I can usefully say very much more. I mean I've said what I should say. I also feel I've enjoyed my own personal freedom at the cost of not playing a role in the public life, which I would have played if I had been given the opportunity. I can't say I've lacked recognition. I've been given the Molson Prize and the Order of Canada, made a Fellow of the Royal Society. I've absolutely no complaints – personally, of course.

My sole complaint would be that I haven't been able to play – I did play a role when I first came here, I had real input into the kind of university this was, on its council. I've withdrawn from those councils because I no longer feel that my kind of contribution is regarded as relevant – I think it's still relevant myself – but I don't feel, at the present stage of malaise at the University, that I could do it. I've really withdrawn because I simply don't believe it's possible.

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**PB:** Thank-you very much, Professor Dobson. This interview has come to an end at 3:55.