ACADEME AND EMPIRE: 
SOME OVERSEAS CONNECTIONS OF ABERDEEN UNIVERSITY 1860-1970

John D. Hargreaves.

The two volumes under review are parts of the series Quincentennial Studies in the history of the University of Aberdeen which commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the university in 1495 and explore different facets of its subsequent history. The series was launched in 1988, and some thirteen volumes have now appeared. It is not a sequential or architectonically organized series. So it would be misleading to call these volumes II and IX, even if they are the second and ninth of the books to be published.

The earlier book recounts and reflects upon the university’s experience of the postwar period, up to 1981. While this is just a very recent stage of a history of epic chronological proportion, which is of course encouraged by the quincentennial conception of the series, it is striking how similar Aberdeen’s postwar
experience is to that of many other universities, including Canadian ones, without the 500-year backdrop. A medium-small essentially provincial - better, regional - tertiary institution confronts the challenges of readjustment to peacetime with rapid expansion in student, faculty, and program numbers occasioned by a tide of prosperity, followed by a dramatic receding of that tide with concurrent greater centralized state control and a diminished prosperity and social commitment to university support. Aberdeen’s is a variant of a tale enacted in the same period widely.

The later volume is a study of the University of Aberdeen’s role in imperial history, and such other interconnections it had beyond the United Kingdom, in the period 1860-1970. The first half of this 110-year span was the high noon of the British imperial experience, and it is interesting to follow the book’s author - John D. Hargreaves - as he traces threads of outward odyssey from Aberdeen to most of the corners of the Empire, and returning inputs of imperial subjects who came to Aberdeen to study. Also followed are such interconnections with parts of the world outside the empire as occurred. In the period before the second world war these were relatively minor, mostly involving the United States (of course itself a one-time component of the empire) and occasionally scattered parts of Europe and Asia: some Americans came to Aberdeen for education, as did a few Hungarians, Poles, Chinese, and others. The authors make imperial experience comparisons, qualitative and quantitative, with other United Kingdom (and especially other Scottish) universities, and find a good number of parallels. In the post-1945 period Aberdeen’s experience parallels that of a wide plurality of primary universities in the first world with considerable numbers of international students, above all from third-world countries, joining local student populations.

Much then in this record is significantly similar to the destinies of a wide range of other universities in the modern world in the 120-year span the two volumes cover. It is a limitation of the books, I would say, especially of the first, that their authors do not see the extent of the commonality of university experience beyond the United Kingdom. Largely inspired if not actually
directly developed by British models and artisans, the universities and colleges of the English-speaking world have had as a group over the three centuries since these institutions have existed outside the British Isles impressively uniform kinds of fate. A small handful of elite metropolitan institutions in each of the national societies concerned has drawn broadly on students from all corners of its territories and sought, and to a significant degree achieved, a role of supplier of the chief group of architects and upper servants of the state's projects; and smaller essentially local tertiary institutions have drawn upon and served primarily local communities and needs, with a filtered subgroup going on to the national or international stage. In post-imperial and more egalitarian, and usually prosperous, times there has been a certain leavening of this profile, with more institutions created to serve wider needs, and the university like other constituents of the modern world participating (sometimes reluctantly) in what at least much of the planet knows increasingly as a global village.

Beyond registering these reactions, it would be wrong and in its own way parochial to dwell on them. This is local history, a recording of how events have seemed on the inside to those who lived through and are reflecting afterwards upon them; together with local and regional archival and statistical investigation, of who attended the University of Aberdeen, where they came from and where they went and what they did after doing so, and of what sort of (especially economic) interface has existed between the university and the rest of northeast Scotland. In 1945-46 some 56% of the full-time student body had home addresses from within 30 miles of the city of Aberdeen. By 1980-81 the student complement from the entire Grampian region stood at only 33.75%. To be sure, Aberdeen remained an overwhelmingly Scottish institution: some 77.25% of its students were of Caledonian origin. In the same year 6.9% of the students came from outside the U.K.

Aberdeen’s historic strength was in theology and applied science programs - especially medicine and forestry, subsequently also engineering - with representation, and occasional prominence, across a broad traditional spectrum. (The university’s senior seven chairs, all founded in 1505, are in Humanity, Greek,
Moral Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics, Law, and Natural Philosophy.) The fields of principal stature in relatively recent times provided the basis for most of the university’s international experience. For example, of the 1,378 Aberdeen graduates 1860-1900 who are known to have served overseas, some 810 worked in medicine, and 89 in other applied sciences, with a further 191 doing church and mission work - some 78.1% then bringing the fruits of their Aberdonian training in theology and applied sciences to the outerworld (chiefly the world of empire). The other sizeable constituencies of graduates working overseas were in education and in government administrative service. This overall pattern of focus continues on the whole into the twentieth century. And it is also reflected in the academic concentrations of students from outside the British Isles.

The two volumes offer a wealth of interesting personal accounts of particular graduates and their careers, often distinguished, though rarely of the upper tier of fame and success. One obtains, as the imperial volume notes, a strong sense of Aberdeen as providing a significant portion of the ‘middle management’ of empire, and, in the post-imperial period, of British overseas endeavour in commerce, medicine, science, and education. Some of the anecdotes enlarge a little on the data of Aberdeen degree and date, and the countries and offices of service. We read of one Aberdeen graduate (Benjamin Knowles (MB 1907)) serving in the then Gold Coast who “had the distressing experience of being tried for the murder of his wife”. One might have thought Knowles’s distress distinctively secondary to that of his deceased wife; we are not informed of the outcome of Knowles’s trial. Occasional misadventure of this kind aside (and a number of cases of violent deaths in imperial service), the overall sense is of quiet steady contribution to the life and work of the empire, and the material conditions of its subjects in the local environments in which the Aberdonian physicians, engineers, agricultural specialists, teachers, and missionaries worked.

Both volumes give scrupulous tabular attention to women in the University of Aberdeen record. We may note, for example, that the university graduated 4,539 persons in the 1901-1925
period, of whom 1,627 (35.8%) were women. Sizeable numbers of this group went on to overseas work.

The destinations abroad of Aberdeen graduates span most parts of the empire. But in the early period (1860-1880), India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) received almost a third of them, and the numbers going to the subcontinent always remained high until after the second world war. Other primary destinations were Australia, South Africa, and Canada and the U.S.A. North America rose to first place - nearly 30% - in the postwar period (1946-1966). Connections with the European continent were on the whole rather minor and secondary. Desultory attempts were made to develop and foster programs in modern European languages and culture, and exchange endeavours had occasional success, but there is detectable what was usually a clear indifference on the part of the Aberdeen authorities towards the other side of the Channel.

Life at Aberdeen over the course of the twentieth century was in general local in horizon and focus, judging by these books. Halls of residence only date from the postwar period. Students generally took rooms (typically, with a widowed landlady). Financial support was meagre. There was little student (or faculty) activism; relatively little even in the storied 'Sixties. Student newspapers in the decades after 1945 generally lament campus apathy and conformism.

Rapid university expansion in this period brought new opportunities, and challenges; the Thatcher years particularly provided a strong dose of the latter. The postwar volume closes with a sense of the ominous note of special threat to the institution in the period (the 'Eighties) at hand.

To sum up: these books provide an interesting, statistically informed set of understandings of an old regional university that historically served (and led) its home territory, then played a significant staffing role in the service sectors of empire, and encountered fresh breezes, some of them cold ones, in the nationally expansionist and egalitarian aftermath of empire.

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