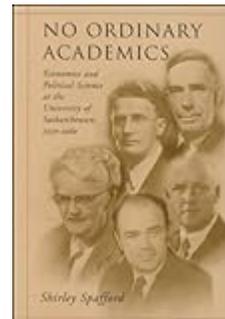




Shirley Spafford. *No Ordinary Academics: Economics and Political Science at the University of Saskatchewan, 1910-1960.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. ix + 272 pp. \$45 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-4437-2.



Reviewed by Robin F. Neill (Department of Economics, University of Prince Edward Island and Carleton University)

Published on EH.Net (September, 2000)

In the words of W. C. Murray, President of the University of Saskatchewan from its founding in 1910 until his retirement in 1937, his economists were to be “no ordinary academics” because, following practice at the University of Wisconsin (as Murray saw it), they were to serve the economic and political interests of the farmers who, ultimately, paid the university’s bills. There was little, if any, institutional and personnel difference between economics and political science at the university, in part because political science had yet to identify itself as a separate social science, and in part because the mission of economics at Saskatchewan was to shape national and provincial policy in the interests of Western Canada.

No Ordinary Academics is well written in the tradition of Canadian academic biography. Shirley Spafford is to be congratulated on a contribution to the field of Canadian Intellectual History. Still, some caveats for the would-be reader are in order.

The book is not a work in the history of ideas. Its approach is personal and institutional. With the exception of a few pages describing a strong element in the historiographical stance of Vernon Fowke, the reader is left with just a suggestion of what the content of Economics and Political Science was on the Saskatoon campus. Classroom economics was what it was elsewhere, but what

it was elsewhere is not revealed. It seems to have been unimportant to the people involved. Having the correct policy stance, one consistent with the views of the agrarian community to be served, was more important. Political science was constitutional history and a smattering of the classics in political philosophy. Competence in advanced neoclassical theory, or, later, in Keynesian theory, in mathematical economics, or econometrics was not a requirement, though it was increasingly present in the department. Of course, there were courses in introductory economics, money and banking, international trade, and public finance.

It was important for the faculty to be adequately schooled in economics. Until Murray resigned in 1937, to be Scots was also important. To be Scots and Presbyterian was to be among the chosen.

Murray, in the course of a long interview, showed only lukewarm interest in hiring him until it came out that [R. McG.] Dawson was Nova Scotian, and proud of it, at which point Murray, whose fondness for Nova Scotia had never diminished, was completely won over (p. 115).

The book has some tantalizing interest for the historian of economic thought in Canada. For example, we all

know that H. A. Innis, at Toronto in the 1930s, was less than accepting of the socialist historian, Frank Underhill. What I expect few of us knew, and Spafford has revealed, is that Underhill, while a member of the Department of Economics and Political Science at Saskatchewan, “published a searing criticism of Innis’s book on the fur trade.” But here we experience the shortcoming of Spafford’s book. She offers not a clue as to the views expressed by Innis or Underhill in this matter, and she does not provide detailed bibliographical references to the literature in question. Indeed, the book has thirty-nine pages of endnotes, citing mostly other biographies, personal papers, and letters, and it has an excellent nineteen-page index, but it has no bibliography or list of references. The present reviewer would have benefited from the in-text, general references to the works of Fowke and Timlin in the chapter dealing with their contributions, but considerable additional digging would have been necessary before the newly revealed items could have been added to attempted definitive lists of their publications. Spafford recounts in some detail the personal conflicts and power struggles in the department, but, some intriguing clues aside, she throws no light on their doctrinal dimensions.

Weak with respect to ideas and bibliography, *No Ordinary Academics* is strong with respect to personal, social, and institutional history. Economics at Saskatchewan was heavily influenced by the preferences of the self-

selecting elite that shaped Canadian universities, especially between 1910 and 1940. The account presents an impressive list of outstanding Canadian social scientists (which is not to say economists, as that term is now understood) whose early careers included a stay in the department at Saskatchewan. In the end, however, given the financial constraints on the university in the 1930s, it was home-grown scholars, influenced by conditions on the Prairies, that made a distinctively western contribution to economic analysis of the Canadian case. (For the intellectual substance of their contribution see R. F. Neill, “Economic Historiography in the 1950s: the Saskatchewan School,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 34, 1999, pp. 243-260.)

No Ordinary Academics is an account of selected external factors shaping economics at the University of Saskatchewan between 1910 and 1960. The principal members of what elsewhere has been called the Saskatchewan School – Vernon Fowke, George Britnell, Mabel Timlin, and Ken Buckley – were no ordinary academics. From Spafford’s history we know that they were idealists, even romantics, who put economics at the service of their altogether honorable social goals. Their rewards were largely non-monetary; working as they did for their students, their associations, and their governments, provincial and national, frequently at their own expense, and despite appallingly low remuneration.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://eh.net/>

Citation: Robin F. Neill. Review of Spafford, Shirley, *No Ordinary Academics: Economics and Political Science at the University of Saskatchewan, 1910-1960*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4537>

Copyright © 2000, EH.Net and H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission questions, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3309). Published by EH.NET.