

## **A Yank among the Loyalists: Review of Peter C. Kent's *Inventing Academic Freedom: The 1968 Strax Affair at the University of New Brunswick* (Halifax: Formac, 2012)**

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For those of us in literary studies, Peter Kent's *Inventing Academic Freedom* will strike a couple of familiar chords. First, it recollects the circumstances surrounding John Thompson's tenure application at Mount Allison University in 1969. An American poet of considerable talent and influence, Thompson was denied tenure at Mount Allison because he had what was deemed to be an inadequate scholarly record, a conclusion that inflamed a large majority of students and faculty. (Supporting faculty cited his stellar teaching evaluations as well as his innovative poetry and translations, while students voted in record numbers to increase their own ancillary fees in order to keep him on campus as writer-in-residence.) Joining the senior administration against Thompson was a small cadre of English department members and "socially prominent" establishment types, their position expressed in the view that Thompson was "a subversive...[who] should not be permitted to stay in the peaceable kingdom of this small, respectable university with its proper Methodist background" (Sanger 28). The ensuing conflict between the two groups threw the small university into almost eighteen months of political turmoil, and the event became the fault line that divided the old from the new university. After the Thompson affair, the university would evolve in lockstep with the processes we know of today as collective agreements. For better or worse, the affair brought to a close the era of the (presumed) gentleman scholar and (presumed) benevolent patrician.

*Inventing Academic Freedom* documents a similar situation at the University of New Brunswick at almost exactly the same time, and more generally reminds us that the tolerance of difference and the sharing of institutional power are often catalysts for organizational change. That Americans with progressive and impudent ideas were at the forefront of these turns says much about the nineteenth-century politics of our provincial institutions in the 1960s. What the Strax and Thompson affairs make clear is that New Brunswick was indeed a backwater at that time, but not a backwater safely insulated from political struggles elsewhere. Rather, the province's institutions, especially those of higher learning, were as susceptible and receptive to the dictates of modernity as those in more cosmopolitan centres. As a record of institutional and bureaucratic change, Professor Kent's book is both timely and important.

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Two distinct entities occupy the centre of the book. The first is the brash Norman Strax who arrived from Harvard to teach physics at UNB in 1966. Like Mount Allison's John Thompson, Strax chose New Brunswick for its bucolic appeal, imagining in its pine forests and river valleys an anodyne to the filth and hostility of urban America. Like Thompson, however, Strax learned that the bucolic was neither comforting nor benign, and he became disenchanted with the pastoral he sought, finding in its rural calm a political indifference born of elitism and ignorance. To agitate against those contagions he started organizing students, first in protest of the Vietnam War, then against K.C. Irving and his minions in government, then in opposition to UNB's increasingly officious

bureaucracy. Protests against the latter, and against Strax's eventual dismissal, culminated in Liberation 130, an occupation of Strax's office in Loring Bailey Hall in October and November 1968.

As in Sackville, the affair divided the UNB campus into left and right factions among students and faculty. The divide between Arts and Applied Sciences became manifest at this time. Arts students aligned with Strax while students from Engineering and Business sided with the administration-friendly James Dineen, Dean of Engineering. Implicit but clear in Kent's book is the long history of class servitude fuelling that split: Beaverbrook, Irving, and his future senior managers (read corporate New Brunswick) against a disorganized mob of disgruntled Arts students (read rank-and-file New Brunswickers). The clash between the two still divides the province today, arresting its forward development.

The other entity that emerges powerfully in Kent's book is the university itself. Led by the young Colin B. Mackay (hand-picked by Beaverbrook over the wishes of UNB's search committee), the university shifts from an enlightened place of remove where young professionals are trained, thus maintaining a predictable class compact, to a more socially relevant *carrefour sociaux* where students and faculty do not abet but contest class expectations. As such, the book is a much-needed institutional history of modern UNB, an overdue look into the conservative culture of New Brunswick in the turbulent 1960s, and a harbinger of what university politics would become, both in the province and nationally.

The portrait Kent paints of changing presidential governance in universities in Canada is particularly vivid: Mackay, the complex autocrat, slowly loses his hold on UNB as it moves from a private bastion of the moneyed (the place where Toronto's business elite sent their children) to a public and corporate entity (where secular and working-class values dominate). The Canadian Association of University Teachers' (CAUT's) censoring UNB over the Strax affair precipitates the change and slowly unravels the authority of the industrialists (Irving and Beaverbrook), who occasionally used the university against the wishes of its Board of Governors. In this regard, the book is as much a glimpse into the development of union politics (and CAUT's stewardship) as it is a fascinating portrait of UNB's sometimes-painful coming of age.

With Kent himself as internal witness—he was Mackay's executive assistant as well as don of MacKenzie House residence where many of the leading student activists lived—*Inventing Academic Freedom* also says important things about national and provincial contexts. The book positions UNB in the wider narrative of campus unrest across the country, whether the infamous 1969 Computer Riot at Sir George Williams in Montreal or similar activist uprisings at Regina College and Simon Fraser University during the turbulent 1960s. At the same time, its glimpse into the motives of Strax, Mackay, Beaverbrook, and Irving takes the book back to the province itself. Though its focus is clearly on UNB, its larger overture is provincial as it documents the shift in New Brunswick from autocratic rule to collective governance. Small republicans like Strax, and Thompson at Mount Allison, had no time for governance by great men, so they saw to it that their universities would change. In the process, they changed the province, adding momentum to a larger shift that had seen Louis Robichaud's populist government unseat Hugh John Flemming's patrician reign. Still in place, the tension between a corporate-aligned political class in the south and a more widely distributed provincial citizenry makes this book timely reading for New Brunswickers today.

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The book strikes a final chord worth mentioning, if only for the irony of the circumstance. Upon exiting New Brunswick, Strax went to teach at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, a place of some notoriety in literary history. The college had long been associated with Lewis Wallace, author of *Ben Hur* (1880), and more recently with Ezra Pound, the great activist revolutionary who modernized poetry in the West. Wabash was the college that had dismissed the radical Pound in 1907. A young instructor, Pound had fed and housed a destitute girl from a burlesque show during a late-fall blizzard. When his landlady discovered the young girl sleeping in his flat, she immediately called the college president, accusing Pound of being “the Latin Quarter type.” There was no impropriety, Pound later wrote, only an effort to shelter a wayward girl. Unmoved by his charity, the president fired him on the spot to preserve the reputations of the college governors. Did Strax know that history? Likely not. Did the college, still a model of moral leadership in the 1970s, know Strax’s past? Also unlikely. The result, not surprisingly, was that Strax didn’t last long in Crawfordsville, Indiana. Radicals rarely do, though the ripples of their unorthodoxy often travel far.

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### Work Cited

Sanger, Peter, ed. *John Thompson: Collected Poems & Translations*. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1995.