

ILS SE SOUVIENNENT...

A University Community

Some time ago, Sylvie Crinquand asked me if I would like to write a piece for the anniversary celebrations. To twist my arm, she even said I could write in English. At first, I thought that I would surely have something to say, but fairly quickly I became aware of a distressing contradiction. It all seemed rather artificial to celebrate 300 years when the recent past—the past I had lived through and been a part of—had, as it were, vanished without much trace. I and many of my retired fellow colleagues no longer felt any sense of connection with the university. If the University Bulletin still exists (perhaps on-line these days), we do not receive it and after the first year our email addresses were cancelled. Somehow it was hard to muster a feeling of belonging or, even, having belonged. Our contribution seemed to have been negligible ; the world—and the university with it—had moved on. So why all this fuss about 300 years. I had no desire to be a kill-joy, but I didn't feel that I could make a contribution at all.

The reaction of a grumpy old man, I hear you say, and perhaps you are right. With the « woke » culture that is so widespread these days, I regularly feel like an old curmudgeon. And perhaps I am : set in my ways and downright stubborn, only too ready to find fault, complain and sulk. Too many of my sentences begin with the words « in my day... ».

But I am beginning to wonder if my reaction is not mere sour grapes after all ; perhaps it is essentially more of an English reaction. My own former university (Cambridge) not only has a well-documented history that is kept up to date, but it also constantly keeps in touch with its old members. All graduates receive quarterly magazines from the university and my own college (Emmanuel) sends an annual « yearbook », regular updates and a bi-monthly newsletter giving details of what is going on. I have been receiving them for over fifty years. I am one of the many « old members » who have a genuine sense of belonging and having belonged.

French academic traditions are not, of course, the same and it is no doubt pointless to expect them to be so. My former university has an enormous annual income and can afford to publish and distribute all of the material it sends out. It is foolish of me to think along the same lines here in Dijon. And I feel decidedly less grumpy when I think of all the pleasant memories that I have—so many excellent students (a handful of whom went on to become friends and members of staff) and some first-rate colleagues who worked together as a genuine team. I began to feel less critical of the anniversary celebration although I was still not quite sure about what contribution I could possibly make.

And then I saw a copy of the hefty volume that Gilles Bertrand has produced to celebrate our tercentenary. It is an impressive piece of research and he should be congratulated unreservedly for it ; the sheer quantity of work involved commands respect. But perhaps you will allow a grumpy old man (sadly obsessed by his English tradition) to draw attention to two omissions from the volume, two aspects of the



academic life that seemed important during the 39 years (a record, I believe) that he spent in the English department. In this way, I can perhaps make a contribution after all.

Let me begin with a question : do names matter ? Perhaps they don't. « That which we call a rose/ By any other word would smell as sweet », they say and perhaps they are right. But there is a word in our university vocabulary to which I am attached and I find it hard to understand why it has been abandoned. It is the word « Faculty », which has given way to the abbreviation U.F.R. (formerly U.E.R). Is it that French universities are embarrassed by their traditional identity and, unlike universities in other countries, have exchanged their ancient coats of arms for a modern logo as though they had become commercial ventures, businesses like so many others : we have become U.B., not unlike SEB really. After all, more and more people believe that students should go to university to get a job not an education.

Or is this another example of American influences creeping in ? We are U.B., just as we have U.C.L.A. or M.I.T. It sounds so much more trendy. But it is worth pointing out that the most distinguished American universities remain attached to their past, their traditions and their traditional names. Harvard, Yale, Princeton and others have not abbreviated themselves into modern relevance.

But now let me contradict myself. Although I regret that the word Faculty has become unfashionable, the three-letter abbreviation that has taken over does, at least, place the emphasis precisely where it should be placed. These academic units combine research with teaching, but it is this aspect that the recent volume perhaps somewhat neglects. The names of those of Professorial rank, those whose research has been fully rewarded (along with Deans—well—Directors) are duly recorded, but not much space is devoted to those teachers who perhaps sacrificed or neglected their personal research (and promotion) because of their commitment to teaching, which is surely an essential component of any U.F.R. Research may be the noblest aspect of the academic career, but teaching—if less prestigious—is of equal importance. Martha has her place alongside Mary in the groves of academe. But I don't see many Maîtres de conférences in the tercentenary volume.

I should say at once that—as you have no doubt guessed—I read the pages devoted to the language departments and the language faculty more closely than the rest of the book. If I am misrepresenting other departments, I apologise. But for our domain, I do feel something is lacking. I am not asking for very much. I simply feel that the volume would be a more complete history if recognition were given to the teaching staff in general. A list of names would do—members of the different departments, perhaps with their length of service. A list, in itself, is not much, but it is an acknowledgement of services rendered. In a gloomier context, the names of those who gave their lives for their country are recorded on our war memorials—not just the names of officers. That's how it used to be centuries ago, but we have come a long way since then. Shakespeare records the names of four English noblemen who died at Agincourt, but no one else was worth mentioning : « none else of name ». It is a pity if our teaching staff are relegated to being « none else of name » in this admirable history of the university.

It goes without saying that compiling a history of this kind means making choices, deciding what to emphasise, what to leave in the background and what to omit. But whenever we make choices we lay ourselves open to criticism ; we can't please everyone. It is no doubt the concentration on the purely academic career which led to the relative neglect of the extremely distinguished founder of the English department, Georges



Connes, who had a notable wartime career and was an important politician outside of the university. But since the history concentrates on academic matters, the apparent neglect of teaching as opposed to research is all the more to be regretted and a member of the English department can only register surprise that no place could be found to mention—in a few words, not paragraphs—a Maître de conférences like Gaby Bouley, an immensely popular teacher and colleague, who gave less attention to research than to the department and its students, spending much of her free time organising play-readings and musical evenings. She at least was « [one] else of name ».

The second omission is an aspect of university life that Gilles Bertrand could not possibly have included and I confess that my thoughts are being guided by my English education. For me, a university has its academic hierarchy, but it is also a community of people who play their part at all sorts of levels. Our students are present on campus a certain number of hours each week. The academic staff are present less often—though scientists can work in their laboratories on a more full-time basis than teachers in the Humanities, who have to share office space and whose basic work has to be done at home. But the non-academic staff, from administrators to cleaners are present all the time. We visit, as it were, a world that they inhabit.

And yet there is no place for them in this history of our university. It couldn't be otherwise, I know, but, somehow, their absence fails to characterise our university as we have experienced it. For many years, the centre point of the English department was the office of Madame Remoissenet, the secretary. She listened to all our woes and successes. She knew us all and she played an important part for us all. Later, when I became Dean, I noticed how often colleagues from all the departments called to see Madame Barras, who began to play a central rôle in the Faculty—more so perhaps than the charming and discreet Madame Petiot, who had in many ways trained Madame Barras. How often we all went, apologetically, to the Xerox room to see Monsieur Lerouge and Madame Baudin when we had failed—as we regularly did—to respect the time limits for handing in texts. And how often did we all rely on Michel Lerat and Christine Machureau? Far too often I fear. There was Madame Beaulieu and more recently the excellent Madame Bramant, who sadly didn't live to enjoy her retirement. I worked with her every day. Her appointment was not welcomed by other members of the personnel, but she soon made herself indispensable.

The oldest of us remember—with a smile, I wager—Monsieur Schmitt, a kindly man who was in charge of allocating rooms and who was often at the door of his office ready for a chat. To some, he seemed a tad disorganised and not quite on top of the job, with his multicoloured slips of paper slotted into a screen, but, when he retired and computers took over, there was little noticeable improvement and the human element left with him.

Again, a full list of names would be more appropriate, but let me single out two more members of our Faculty. There was Monsieur Neto, who was always ready to help and who always had a solution. A smile never left his lips. He did the humblest of tasks, but he was an essential element at the centre of our world. And, of course, the remarkable Madame Henriot, who kept the three Faculties running smoothly. She knew everything and everyone and was a constant presence—still in her carpet slippers in the morning—and throughout the day. She replaced the elderly Monsieur and Madame Rémond and left her place to Patrick when she retired. For me she was a particular friend. After one of the many receptions during my time as Dean, when the speeches were over and everyone was

enjoying a drink—except me, a bag of nerves when there was a speech to be made—Madame Henriot would come up to me and say « Une petite cigarette, Monsieur le Doyen ? ». We would slip out into the corridor and chat together for a few minutes. It became a routine in those halcyon, bygone days when smoking did not make one a pariah and Madame Henriot remains part of my university world as much as any of the most distinguished Professors. For, thinking back over my career, I recall these non-academic members of staff as vividly and as warmly as the teachers and researchers with whom I worked more closely. The university that I remember was more than the combined achievements of its senior professors : it was, above all, a community.

Perhaps you will allow me to close on a note of personal vanity. Faced with the batty ideas of wokism, I find amusement in creating for myself the persona of the grumpy old codger who claims the right to be old-fashioned. Earlier, I used the charming word curmudgeon. Let me explain why. It seems to fit me like a glove. I recently discovered (you can look it up on Google) that there is a Curmudgeon Day. It is celebrated on January 29th.

January 29th is my birthday.

Q.E.D.

Terence McCarthy
(Université de Bourgogne, 1970-2009)

