

## Compte rendu

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Ouvrage recensé :

*Minerva's Aviary: Philosophy at Toronto, 1843-2003*. By John G. Slater. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. xv + 623 p., ill. Fig., bibl., ann. ISBN 0-8020-3870-0 75 \$)

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*Scientia Canadensis: Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine / Scientia*

*Canadensis : revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine* , vol. 30, n° 2, 2007, p. 123-125.

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DOI: 10.7202/800550ar

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## ***Book Reviews / Comptes rendus***

### **HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES / SCIENCES HUMAINES ET SOCIALES**

***Minerva's Aviary: Philosophy at Toronto, 1843-2003.* By John G. Slater. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. xv + 623 p., ill. Fig., bibl., ann. ISBN 0-8020-3870-0 75 \$)**

The philosophy department at the University of Toronto currently has close to 70 professors; to put things in perspective, the other big philosophy departments in Canada have anywhere between 15 and 30 professors. This fact alone could be the premise of a research project. With *Minerva's Aviary*, J.G. Slater provides a prehistory and history of the philosophy department at the University of Toronto, how it emerged from its religious foundations to become one of the influential philosophy departments in the English speaking world.

As explained in the preface of the book, the project emerged from an institutional request to retrace some of the history of various units at University of Toronto. This means that it was originally intended for an internal audience which explains in part some omissions and some of the emphases. Slater is not a historian; he is an emeritus faculty member of the philosophy department and has been chair of the department for a few non-consecutive terms, which gives him a privileged vantage point on the department's history.

The first part of the book is rife with minutiae concerning the education politics of Ontario in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Solomonic (or not) decisions of chairs, deans and university presidents, etc. But after 200 pages or so, this (non-historian) reader found another quality to this book: this is a big sprawling 'family' history, and one cannot help getting interested in the family patterns that persist and those that are abandoned. The book focuses mainly on the individuals that have been at the helm of the department through the years but other significant members of the department are examined as well. Slater offers an even-handed depiction of this family's trajectory in the university world while also providing his personal assessment of some of the characters involved (e.g. T.A. Goudge 'good', F.H. Anderson 'not so much').

Because he is writing about his own 'family' it's not surprising that the treatment offered of the 'deep' past is very different from that of the 'recent' history he has taken part in. A quirky example of this is the peculiar interest Slater has about salaries. He makes a special effort to indicate detailed compensation for all members of the department ... that is, all the faculty until Slater himself is hired at University of Toronto. We

have accountant grade information of compensation from 1843 until 1964 and then absolutely nothing. This symptomatic shift in the book (around p. 375) reflects itself in other ways. The epic political/departmental battles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century are completely absent from the 60s on. Since he was an interested party from then on, this is completely understandable especially if the natural audience of the book is within the institution itself. But given that Slater shows no such restraint in the first half of the book, the change is abrupt. In fact the second half of the book may not be not as useful for it relates easily accessible information (who was hired, when and from where) and does not offer much judgement on the transformations the department must have gone through in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Slater does offer some brief editorial remarks concerning recent or future developments (e.g. the hypothetical rise of an autonomous bioethics department), but they are scarce and more conservative than the ones offered in earlier parts of the book. The deep past gets an epic treatment that reads like a mix of *University Affairs*, *Jane Austen* and *David Lodge*, while the recent past gets mostly the *University Affairs* treatment. It remains interesting but it is less involving for the reader, and Slater insider's status is under utilized.

Given the thoroughness of the research involved, three lacunae are somewhat surprising. First, where is the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology? Slater mentions the IHPST maybe 4 times in the book (and only to mention joint appointments). It can't be that he is limiting himself solely to the philosophy department itself, since he offers a succinct but fascinating account of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. Sadly the reader will learn nothing about IHPST in this book. Secondly, where is the research? As the author notes, the focus on research in academic philosophy is relatively recent. Even so, there is virtually no mention of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in the book. The reader will not know if or how research funding has changed the department in its composition or in its aims. Given the current importance of research (and funding) in academic philosophy, more needs to be said about this point. Thirdly, where are the rankings? One of the many interesting factoids provided by Slater is that a University of Toronto's philosopher, C. Webb, was in charge, by himself, of the first Maclean's University ranking. What is omitted however is any mention of the ranking headed by Brian Leiter (philosophy and law at the University of Texas at Austin). This biennial ranking (the *Philosophical Gourmet Report*) ranks most of the English-speaking philosophy departments in the world according to a reputational survey based on assessment of research output. The University of Toronto is consistently ranked 1st in Canada and equivalent to the top 10 in the United States. Slater does not mention this ranking even though it probably has had an impact on its successes in recent hirings, the quality

of its graduate student pool or on the placement of its students. The latter two lacunae reflect relatively recent changes to the field, but changes that many departments have had to contend with in the last decades. Other significant details are strangely missing (e.g. we do not have any student cohort figures after the 70s), but these omissions can be forgiven since the book is already a richly woven tapestry of the institution. As pointed out earlier, the initial aim of the project, namely to provide philosophy's part to the institutional memory at University of Toronto, may explain the omissions.

Slater is in a difficult position: how do you offer something special and unique about a family history without falling into gossip, personal information and personal politics? Slater chose a careful path, airing out the dirty laundry of the past (1843-1964) and giving some partial but detailed factual information about the present. This is an impressive example of institutional memory and any department would be lucky to have such a thoughtful and diligent history keeper as Slater. But concerning recent events, it will be up to future historians to offer all the gory details.

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