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Book Review: My Life and Work: A Happy Partnership, by J. A. Corry

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My Life and Work: A Happy Partnership. By J.A. CORRY. Kingston, Ont.: Queen's University. 1981. Pp. xvi, 238. (\$18.50)

The life of J. Alex Corry, former Principal of Queen's University, law professor and public servant (in the best sense of that phrase) can be described as a "happy medium". He is a temperate and reasonable person who has achieved much in his long life because those qualities of moderation have given a tempo and a meaning to his life.

He describes his childhood in rural Ontario when the practical application of community and co-operation was still an everyday occurrence, when taxes and Ottawa did not intrude on his family and their neighbours and "Jeffersonian democrats were everywhere in the North American rural countryside in the nineteenth century".¹ He described his township of Millbank as "almost a tiny independent republic"² whose inhabitants "were free of the present day corroding resentment about decisions that affect us intimately and deeply being made by distant authorities whom we do not know, have no direct effective control over, and no power to warn off".³

Corry has interesting things to say about the early days of Saskatchewan's law school which was a full-time institution when Upper Canadian legal education was still floundering with a glorified apprentice system. He also worked for the Rowell-Sirois Commission and shows the great contribution made to that report by prairie scholars. For ten years he was a member of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and it is refreshing to hear him describe a broadcasting licence as "not

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¹ P. 25.

² P. 23.

³ *Ibid.*

a property but a privilege".⁴ He spent many years working on behalf of the Canada Council and his comments on some research applications show a healthy intolerance of academic humbug: "Some I thought worthless, because they were on trivial topics and whatever the findings, would merely enlarge the stock of useless knowledge. Others proposed to use highly sophisticated techniques to provide pompous elaboration of the obvious; there was no need to go through the exercise."⁵ In describing the establishment of Queen's Law School, he provides some revisionist history of the Law Society of Upper Canada's attitudes toward reform of legal education which shows that the Benchers were not quite so intransigent as we had previously supposed.⁶ For instance, Corry describes "Caesar" Wright as "a blunt, somewhat angular, person who was never inhibited in speaking his mind by considerations of diplomacy".⁷

Much of the latter half of the book is taken up with the history of Queen's University in the last two decades. This is perfectly understandable because Corry played a very important role in expanding that institution and in fostering the distinct co-operative and happy spirit which seems to pervade the place. Nevertheless, I found the description of university administration as unexciting as it is to endure on an everyday basis.

I would like to conclude this review by quoting some of the sayings of Principal Corry because I think they are profound and deserve wide circulation:

I have always thought Narcissus . . . was underemployed.⁸

In describing his maternal grandfather and perhaps prefiguring Alex Corry's own career:

Grandfather Neilson was for many years the official fence-viewer for the area, a conciliator called in on line-fence disputes which were common and often bitter. Often it was easy enough to determine where the boundary lines lay, but sometimes the conflict arose out of other, more rancorous, matters. So, much depended on his reputation for fair-mindedness and on his diplomacy. He was known in the district as "the peace-maker."⁹

Corry gives us some of his own philosophy.¹⁰

In isolation, man cannot raise himself up to the level of the animals. There is a unique potential in every individual, but many of his constituent qualities bear the impress of the community which shaped him.

⁴ P. 113.

⁵ P. 123.

⁶ See, for corroboration, Arnup, *The 1957 Breakthrough* (1982), 16 L. Soc. Upp. Can. Gaz. 180.

⁷ P. 153.

⁸ P. 2.

⁹ P. 15.

¹⁰ P. 131.

And:

The only certain cure is for us all to become more civilised. And who will venture to deny that civilisation has been nurtured within the letter of the laws?¹¹

. . . the larger the clusters of power, the more the power-hungry are attracted there to feed on it. So at some point the shift of power to the centre is carried still further—in part by its own momentum. Continuing heavy centralisation . . . leads to apoplexy at the centre and anaemia at the extremities.¹²

And in echoing Reinhold Neibuhr (whom he obviously admires), Corry says:¹³

. . . this excessively self-righteous self-centredness is the corroding canker or virus which threatens to corrupt all human enterprises, because the demand for stability, permanence and meaning wells up from the deep recesses of human nature and seeks inordinate expression.

And finally,

The perfect is forever the enemy of the good.¹⁴

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¹¹ P. 137.

¹² P. 158.

¹³ P. 161.

¹⁴ P. 163.

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