Acad. Quest. (2011) 24:223–233
DOI 10.1007/s12129-011-9228-9

REVIEW ESSAY

Diary of a Dean, by Herbert I. London. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010, 60 pp., $14.99 paperback.

Decline and Revival in Higher Education, Herbert I. London. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010, 336 pp., $39.95 hardbound.

A Dean Remembers

Edward A. Rauchut

Published online: 6 May 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

Herbert I. London's two new books, *Diary of a Dean* and *Decline and Revival in Higher Education*, deserve close attention. In them London traces higher education's downward trajectory over the past fifty years as it abandoned classical liberal values and embraced relativism and left-wing orthodoxy. I have to admit there were times when London's numerous examples of egregious campus political correctness became overwhelming. But when yet another outrage at London's alma mater made recent headlines, I was back in his corner, ready to watch him come out slugging again.

The incident I refer to involves the heckling by Columbia University students of freshman and former Army staff sergeant, Anthony Maschek. The occasion was a town hall meeting this past February 15 on whether the ROTC, which had been banned from the Columbia campus for more than forty-two years, should be permitted to return. Maschek was awarded the Purple Heart after having been shot eleven times in battle in northern Iraq in February 2008. He spent two years in the Walter Reed Army Medical Center recovering from his wounds. His words to the assembly of fellow Columbia University students were measured: "It doesn't matter how you feel about the war. It doesn't matter how you feel about fighting. There are bad men out there plotting to kill you." His remarks met with jeers and derisive laughter. Students called Maschek a racist and demanded he be removed from the stage. So much for free speech, tolerance, and civility at one of the nation's major universities. The incident is illustrative of the alarm that London sounds in these books.

Edward A. Rauchut is Grewcock Chair in American Vision and Values and director of the Center for American Vision and Values at Bellevue University, Bellevue, NE 68005; erauchut@bellevue.edu.

Herb London graduated from Columbia in 1960 and received his doctorate in history from New York University in 1966. He is the former John M. Olin Professor of Humanities at NYU (1993–2003), where he founded the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, a Great Books program, in 1972 and served as its dean until 1992. He was a Republican candidate for mayor of New York City in 1989 and ran as the Conservative Party candidate for governor of New York in 1990. In 1994 he ran unsuccessfully for New York State comptroller. He now serves as president of the Hudson Institute.

Diary of a Dean is London's memoir of his professional academic life, most of which took place at NYU, ground zero for much of the disruptive influence of the 1960s and 1970s. As an undergraduate, London attended Columbia University. London's choice was largely influenced by his father, a basketball fan like his son, who wanted him to attend Columbia, home of basketball coach Lou Rossini. But the course of London's life changed when he was introduced to Columbia's "C.C. Hum"—a two-year required curriculum of courses in Contemporary Civilization and the Humanities. Basketball remained important to him, but London's "thoughts often strayed from the hardwood to the dusty stacks in the Butler Library."

He was, in short, won over by the world of the mind. And the faculty at the time served only to increase the allure: Mark and Charles Van Doren, Samuel Huntington, Daniel Bell, Amitai Etzioni, Richard Hofstader, William Casey—and his greatest influence, Jacques Barzun. Watching Barzun in the classroom, London notes, "was like watching Fred Astaire on film. He was elegant, in control, self-effacing, brilliant." By his junior year London had abandoned a pre-med major to pursue an academic career, and soon after graduation enrolled in a doctoral program in political science at NYU. This led to a Fulbright, study in Australia, the publication of his first book, *Non-White Immigration and the White Australian Policy* (1970), and a faculty position at NYU.

London's goal as a newly minted professor was "to excite students about ideas" in the way he remembered from his time at Columbia. But this was the late 1960s, and his students, for the most part, were not buying what he was selling. "I didn't appreciate the *zeitgeist*," London observes. "The war in Vietnam was heating up. Robert Kennedy had been assassinated. Gene McCarthy seemed to capture the acceptance of the young. Martin Luther

King was murdered. The world was being turned topsy-turvy. This generation of students wanted action. Even those who were normally contemplative were caught up in the wave of ideological sentiment."

London's Fulbright grant to visit Australia had brought with it an epiphany. Australia's pro-American sentiment prompted him to become "probably the only American of my age to be converted from antiwar advocate to an equivocal prowar defender in the period from 1965 to 1967." He equivocated only because as a "New York liberal" who had not yet been mugged by reality he "just couldn't be prowar." The inevitable mugging would occur—and with greater and greater regularity—as he moved through his academic career.

The first drubbing came with London's appointment as campus ombudsman—a sort of intermediary between disgruntled and disturbed students and the campus bureaucrats who were supposed to be able to help them. If nothing else, the degree to which London took the position seriously is mind-boggling. "In hoards," he writes, "they came for relief, absolution, help and to satisfy their curiosity. After a week…I found my own research suffering, my neck stiff and my wife looking at me in disbelief as I related the tales of indiscretion and woe." A colleague called him a "high-grade hydrant." London, with characteristic aplomb, took comfort "in being high grade, a point," he goes on to add, that he "could not make as a dean years later."

His deanship came as a surprise. NYU had agreed to join a consortium of experimental colleges. Each participating college received a grant of $25,000 from the Department of Education and the Ford Foundation. The participating NYU program was known as the University Without Walls (UWW). To his surprise, London was tapped to head the new program. As director and ultimately dean, London's first request was for walls—office space. He was given two dormitory spaces in the women's dorm. "As a dedicated traditionalist," London writes, "I was probably the wrong candidate for the job of director."

He went on to write an article for the *Saturday Review* in which he described most educational experiments of the type he was involved in as lacking any real substance. For this he was promptly "drummed out of the nontraditional fraternity." To make matters worse, his non-traditional idea was a great books program. "As I organized the

program," London recalls, "a general education requirement of sixty points was replaced by great books and classic texts requirements….The great books requirement is one dimension of the activities that set us apart from all other nontraditional programs. In fact, it also set us apart from many traditional programs."

University-wide support for his project came at a faculty council meeting in 1972, when, as he was explaining his concept, he was interrupted by the distinguished professor of philosophy, Sidney Hook. London's account is noteworthy:

> As I was explaining my goals, Professor Sidney Hook… interrupted my remarks and inquired if a great person ever graduated from an external degree program. So nonplussed was I by this question that I couldn't think of a great person who had graduated from a *traditional* college program. Moreover, Professor Hook had apparently confused my description with an external degree program, which the UWW decidedly was not. However, Professor Hook was waiting for an answer. Reaching into my memory bank, where trivia about everything from the etymology of "brouhaha" to George Kell's career batting average aimlessly swam about, I blurted out, "Lenin." Now Lenin is not a great man in my opinion, an opinion with which Professor Hook concurred. However, he looked at me in astonishment and asked, "How do you know that?" I said, "Lenin attended the University of Moscow extension division. I remember reading that in Bertram Wolfe's *Three Who Made a Revolution*." At that point Professor Hook noted, "Anyone who knows that deserves my support."

The UWW program was renamed in honor of Albert Gallatin, a founder of NYU and fourth secretary of the U.S. Treasury, and London served as its dean for twenty years.

But in short time London discovered the real status and influence of his new position. Early on he voiced his frustrations with a weekly council of deans by noting to the university president that "'the discussion at these meetings is comparable to board meetings at a corporation. We discuss financial matters abstractly but never discuss educational issues.'…The president looked at me with a steely gaze and said, 'Any other comments?' The meeting adjourned; I had learned yet another lesson."

With the U.S. invasion of Cambodia in 1970 came renewed student demonstrations and the cancellation of classes by sympathetic faculty. London held classes. When a demonstrating student attempted to block his way to class, London "pushed him aside as cries of 'fascist' filled the corridors." But a growing orthodoxy of what would eventually be called "political correctness" gained a secure foothold and was soon to dominate the academy. The faculty became so "self assured…that an opinion that didn't fit the prevailing sentiment was either ignored or driven from polite discourse."

London heard NYU president, James Hester, deliver the 1971 commencement address in which he informed his audience that "we have seated before us a class of students prepared to solve the issues of war and peace, income disparity and urban woe." Flummoxed, London later buttonholed Hester, telling him that it was "silly" to make such claims when he could not be certain that these graduating students had ever even read a serious book.

In response to the regnant academic orthodoxy and the diminution of the general education core, London—along with Stephen Balch, Peter Shaw, and my undergraduate instructor in philosophy, Barry Gross—founded the Campus Coalition for Democracy in 1982, which became known as the National Association of Scholars in 1987. London became the organization's first chairman and continues to serve on the board of directors. London cites a recent NAS study, "The Dissolution of General Education: 1914–1993," which documents the case that he records throughout his memoir. As he puts it, "The present university curriculum has gone very far down the road of student participatory democracy, leaving in its wake a hodgepodge of general education programs and ambiguity about priorities in undergraduate education." London believes that "education should pass on the previous contributions of human thought." There is, he argues, "material that all students should know." What is a college education, he ponders, "without exposure to Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Homer, Milton, and Tolstoy, to cite only a few examples."

London concludes *Diary of a Dean* with his assessment of "the tenure trap" —"tenure now protects ideologies it was designed to oppose"—and academic freedom and free speech—"In fact, the problem with the very idea of contemporary academic freedom is that it concentrates on threats from without that rarely exist and overlooks threats from within that have violently disordered the academic mission."

In the end, however, London left the stifling orthodoxy of the academy for the greener pastures of the world of the think tank. The Hudson Institute, of which London is president, "is a home for the open mind; the university has become a hot house for prejudices. So despite the purple in my blood (the NYU color), I moved on." Some might argue that he jumped ship, but he did, at the very least, record his journey, to the benefit of those in higher education and anyone interested in it.

Decline and Revival in Higher Education is a collection of essays published over forty years that chronicle higher education's drift from liberal education to relativism and radical ideology. A revival is possible, London argues, with a return to the university's traditional mission—a return to the best of what is written and thought and a rejection of the present campus orthodoxies that serve only to trivialize the academy in the eyes of the general public—particularly parents who are forking over huge sums for something they themselves would not recognize as education. Interestingly, Allan Bloom, author of the bestselling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), once asked London if he could account for the enormous success of the book. His reply: "Granting that most people don't read Nietzsche, which comprises the second half of the book, and granting as well that serious philosophy doesn't make the bestseller list, I argued that many parents confounded by the psychobabble their college-educated children employ, and tired of being called bourgeois and philistine, were willing to invest $20 to find out why they were wasting $25,000 a year. Professor Bloom nodded knowingly."

Those professors teaching kids to call their parents "bourgeois and philistine" were at the time a new breed of academic. "Deprived of a strong institutional base among elected officials or in the labor movement comparable to that of radical movements elsewhere," London notes, "the Left in America sought sanctuary in the academy." And that sanctuary soon became a permanent nest, fortified by "a network of journals and professional organizations, university departments and academic programs." Radical journals, London argues, soon became a welcome haven for unvetted scholarship and a shortcut to tenure.

London describes the rapid transformation of our colleges and universities. Scholarship and teaching become "extensions of politics" as "the distinction between teaching and indoctrination

altogether evaporates." New disciplines and programs enter by the score: black studies, women's studies, peace studies, and so on, as well as a host of "one-sided, question-begging, or highly partisan course descriptions now…found in college catalogues"—all lacking anything remotely resembling balance. Objective truth itself is soon denied. London quotes radical historian Howard Zinn: "in a world where justice is maldistributed, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' or representative recapitulation of the facts." Thus, the academy became a solipsistic universe of competing grievances.

So much for the moral and intellectual benefits of that thing called a liberal education. London knew long before the publication of Richard Arum and Josipa Roska's *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011) the sorry state of the typical college student's academic skills or accomplishments. "It is almost a cliché," London writes years before the release of Arum and Roksa's findings, "to contend that most college students have not read the great works of Western civilization, or any civilization for that matter, are scientific and math illiterates and cannot construct logical arguments in debate or written statement."

In addition, as tuition costs continued to rise and the demographic bubble of the 1960s burst, things looked bleak for the future of traditional higher education, and the scramble for the "nontraditional" student and a corresponding lowering of academic standards to drive enrollment began. Although London does profess that a revival of traditional education is possible within the present system, he also considers possible alternatives, for example, the corporate degree. Though "narrowly specialized," it is becoming competitive due to increasing cynicism about the high costs and low standards of the conventional four-year degree. "Once parents are persuaded that this less costly [corporate] alternative can confer the same advantages as the elite institutions, the university we have recently known will be obsolete."

What can take its place, London suggests, is cost-effective online delivery of high-quality liberal arts education. With Mark Draper, vice-provost of Grantham University, London declares that "it is essentially inevitable that the very best of knowledge management, learning theory, technology, and curriculum will be synthesized into a highly automated teaching program linked to a robust online community of learners and teachers to provide a

world-class, dirt-cheap college education.” Flash forward to such ventures as the University of Phoenix and Kaplan University, and one might concede that the delivery model is a success. But costs remain high for the student, dependence on federal loans is enormous, and the rigorous traditional liberal arts model that London considers essential to the revival of higher education is all but missing. What vendor is now providing on a significant scale the sort of liberal education that London (and, I suspect, most readers of *Academic Questions*) would approve?

And where is the demand for such a product?

The University of Phoenix, for example, now offers what it calls a “Communication degree program” but no majors in such traditional academic disciplines as English, philosophy, history, or art. A message from Barb Baderman, Ph.D., the dean of the College of Humanities, posted on the University of Phoenix website may tell the prospective student all he needs to know about the quality of its humanities program:

> Welcome to the College of Humanities. As a vital part of a student’s education, the development of knowledge and skills in the disciplines of art, english [*sic*], communications, ethics, philosophy, culture, and history, [*sic*] enhances a students’ [*sic*] understanding and appreciation of the world around them [*sic*]. It is important as students puruse [*sic*] their bachelor’s programs that they integrate other ideas and thoughts across many areas in order to provide a more well-rounded and global view of the world [*sic*] around them.
>
> Knowledge in the humanities areas can be integrated across many areas throughout a students’ [*sic*] life, as well as prepare them [*sic*] to make positive contributions to their [*sic*] community as well as their [*sic*] workplace. Liberal arts education help [*sic*] students to strengthen their analytical thinking…as well as understanding [*sic*] other cultures and peoples in a global world [*sic*].
>
> The College of Humanities offers a Bachelor of Science in Communication degree program. Taught by experienced faculty from the field of communciations [*sic*], the curriculum focuses on the development of the knowledge and skills for effective communication, [*sic*] in a variety of public and private work environments.

[http://www.phoenix.edu/colleges_divisions/humanities/deans-message.html]

On second thought, maybe we should be grateful that the University of Phoenix has refrained from offering traditional liberal arts majors.

If there were a demand for liberal arts majors, you can bet that the University of Phoenix and the other for-profits would be offering them—but the fact is, there isn't. In the Autumn 2009 *American Scholar*, William M. Chace notes in "The Decline of the English Department" that "in one generation [1970–1971 to 2003–2004]…the numbers of those majoring in the humanities dropped from a total of 30 percent to a total of less than 16 percent; during that same generation, business majors climbed from 14 percent to 22 percent."

Nearly all students go to college to improve their economic prospects; a few may go for the love of learning—but in what London calls our "new age," the "possibility of economic mobility through a university education has been converted into the right to a university education as part of equal opportunity." While "universal college education" has become a mantra and a goal," London argues that "middle-class parents should not automatically rule in favor of college for their children," and cites Caroline Bird's excellent study, *The Case Against College* (1975). High tuition costs may simply mitigate against a positive return on investment. It would seem, on the other hand, that as long as business itself remains complicit in the credentialing game, there is little reason to believe that a college degree will not bring with it some economic benefit.

London speculates that if solid liberal arts education were offered online, the knowledge imparted would be "at least equivalent to what a good student learns in four years at an excellent liberal arts school." That could of course be true, if there were a market demand for liberal education. But liberal education is simply not in demand. The whole point of the traditional university is to preserve the best that has been thought and said despite the rise and fall in demand on the part of untutored students.

London's promise for online education is that it "would do what almost all others today strenuously avoid: that is, take the institutions of freedom seriously and devote extended space to their study in depth. Likewise, it would unapologetically affirm the existence of cultural excellence, both literary and artistic,

and promise its students a sustained and systematic exposure to it." It certainly could do this. But where, in fact, is it happening?

Today, although there are of course exceptions to the rule, the liberal arts have been jettisoned for job training that will, it is hoped, lead to career advancement and economic gain. And rather than competing against this trend by offering a viable liberal arts alternative of the type London envisions, for-profit online education has, if nothing else, accelerated the marginalization of the liberal arts. And this marginalization is in fact the disruptive characteristic of nearly all for-profit online education today.

The traditional argument regarding the purpose and efficacy of a liberal education is perhaps still best expressed by John Henry Cardinal Newman in *The Idea of a University*. Taking exception with Locke, who would have all education directed at some practical purpose, Newman refuses to be frightened "from cultivating the intellect." While preparing the student for no particular trade or profession, Newman insists, liberal education nevertheless prepares the student to "fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility."

London would no doubt agree with Newman. Despite his push for online education, London hasn't given up on the traditional university. "In the cultural desert in which we find ourselves," he suggests, "it is incumbent on those with a traditionalist stance to assert it in modest but meaningful ways." His solution is for the creation of new colleges, or at least new departments or programs that can serve as enclaves or oases in which traditional teaching and scholarship can thrive. The approach is one that has garnered no small measure of success for the National Association of Scholars itself. I believe that London's concluding remarks warrant a full hearing:

> A museum should be devoted to the best that has been achieved in artistic forms. By the "best," I am referring to that which is spiritually enriching, aesthetically pleasing, and technically uncompromised. A college should be established without any concessions to the zeitgeist. Students should meet rigorous requirements without electives. Moreover, they should read the great works of our civilization, be literate in two foreign languages, have numeric skill, and be familiar with scientific laws and methods.

> If a college cannot be established because of financial limitations, a department or program should be organized that does not make any compromises with its belief in traditional principles of scholarship. Those that enter this program will know that no concessions have been made to the relativists.

London's goal certainly does not seem an impossible one. Many of us already inhabit such oases, as London himself does in his think-tank world of competing ideas—a world far removed from the present academic orthodoxy, and perhaps most resembling it in its traditional form.

London has fought, and continues to fight, the good fight. His influence is felt in the many organizations his hand has guided. There is much food for thought in these two books—and the seeds for a good many quiet but significant counterrevolutions.