

Oral History Interview with Dr. George “Burpee” Hallett

Conducted by Angela Baker, May 26, 1993

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AB: Okay, first of all we can talk about a little bit of background information about you. Can you state your full name?

GH: George Burpee Hallett. Everybody knows that!

AB: Not looking at a blank tape they won't.

GH: Yeah.

AB: What's your date and place of birth?

GH: Halifax.

AB: Halifax?

GH: 27th of August, 1933.

AB: Can you describe your educational background?

GH: Not much to describe. I went to Dalhousie, and went to University of London and Oxford.

AB: So, how many years have you been associated with Saint Mary's?

GH: Since '60.

AB: Since 1960?

GH: Yeah. That makes thirty-three years, I guess.

AB: So, what capacity was your role, when you first came?

GH: I was one of two English professors.

AB: Oh, yeah?

GH: There were only two of us, and in those days, I think there were only about thirty non Jesuit faculty, and there were no departments. And then, when departments were formed, I became, nominally I suppose, the first Chairman of the English department. And then in 1967 I became Dean of Arts, and then acting Dean of Education. And then, for a time, I was Acting Academic Vice-President. And then, after, what six years as Dean, I had another spell as Chairman of the department. And then I came to my senses, and just went back to being an English professor. So...

AB: So. I imagine you've noticed a great difference in the type of courses that have been offered over the years.

GH: Oh, yes. When we started we had... When I first started here everything was a required course. There were four English courses, four History courses, four courses in this, four courses in that, four courses in the other thing. There were no choices - every student took the same courses. And, it was only, I suppose the mid-sixties that course offerings started to expand, and then in the seventies, they more or less exploded. And I'm not entirely sure that's a very good thing. The courses, the subject areas are so fragmented now that you could take a major in almost any subject and remain ignorant of very important things. Because the subject has been split into increasingly small slivers. Anyway...

AB: I see. So. So you've noticed a big change in the size of the university population since you've been here. What effect does that have?

GH: Well, it shouldn't have had as much effect as it had. The, though in one sense, it hasn't really affected the class size. My class sizes in the early sixties were pretty well as big as anything I have now, simply because we taught everybody. I think there were three hundred and some students here, when I came here.

AB: Um-hum.

GH: And I suppose the big thing that size has affected is the fact that you don't know everybody anymore. The, there was a time, for all practical purposes, you knew everybody in the place. And, of course, when I started it was all-male. The first women students, I think, must have started showing up in the late sixties, then, the... I don't remember. I'm trying to think when the... I suppose the biggest change in size probably occurred in the late sixties, early seventies, 'cause up until sixty-five, sixty-six, it hadn't grown very much. Then it grew very, very rapidly.

AB: Okay. Around the same time, in 1970 as well, the school became secular. What affect did that have?

GH: None.

AB: None?

GH: Not in the, not in the experience of working here, it didn't. It was really immaterial. The...now I suppose it had significant things in some people's minds, but as it affected the actual experience of teaching here, it made no difference what-so-ever.

AB: Um-hum.

GH: Strictly a difference on paper.

AB: Unionization took place in the mid-seventies as well. Do you think that had any effect on...?

GH: Well, I suppose it made some people feel a little more secure, and less likely to be victims of, you know, arbitrary action. But once again, it didn't...it wasn't something that you, sort of, were aware of when you walked in the door in the morning. It didn't, it didn't change things in any significant way. I suppose the one change it did cause, it made the place more adversarial, you know, it became much less collegial. But that's not, once again, something you necessarily sense the presence of everyday. It didn't affect one's relationship with one's students, and that's really the only thing that ever matters as far as I'm concerned.

AB: Have you noticed a difference in your relationship with the students over the years?

GH: Well, I don't know them as well as I used to. And now, it's perfectly possible for someone to major in English and I would never see them, whereas, years ago that wasn't possible. So you don't know who the English students are, the way that once you did. But, as far as the students themselves are concerned, despite what all sorts of people would have you believe, they're no better or no worse than they used to be. The good ones are good, the mediocre ones are mediocre, and the bad ones are bad. And, the, the good ones are no better than the good ones used to be, and the bad ones are no worse, as far as I can tell.

AB: Have you noticed any difference in the student population in terms of age and gender and ethnicity?

GH: Well, we always have had a large, non-Canadian student population for years and years and years here. Back in the early sixties, we had tremendous numbers, relatively speaking, of students from Hong Kong. We always had a lot of African students. We always had a lot of students from Bermuda, and the Caribbean. So, probably to a greater extent than the other schools around here, we've had more of a, an international mix than most places. And I suppose that in the last ten years there are more students of so-called nontraditional age; more mature students showing up. Which is all for the good, as far as I'm concerned. The, I don't think it would hurt if most students, when they left high school, worked for two or three years before they came to university. They'd probably be better off, and the ones who shouldn't come, maybe wouldn't. But, that's not likely to happen.

AB: How about gender? Notice changes in the

GH: There's only two genders as far as I'm concerned. And obviously, there was a change, whenever it took place. But it hasn't...

AB: Do you feel there are more males than females in your classes? Is there a domination of one gender over the other?

GH: I've never bothered to count. I got the impression that it's fifty-fifty. I don't know. It reflects the population, whatever the population is, which I guess, there are slightly more women than men in the population. But, no I don't... It's not something that makes any particular difference that I can see.

AB: Have you noticed any change in the nature of the students' family background? Where they're coming from?

GH: I don't know what it is. No.

AB: No?

GH: No. I...no I don't think so.

AB: Okay. What do you think students want to gain from their educational experience at Saint Mary's? Do you think that's changed since the sixties?

GH: Well, depends. You can't make a blanket statement for the whole student body. The good ones want an education, and the not so good ones want grades. And that's never changed. Probably a significant majority don't really want to learn anything, they just want a degree. They want marks, if they can get them. And it's always the good students who want to learn. That hasn't changed any, never will.

AB: Okay. Let's see.

GH: Einstein said "the majority of the stupidest invincible and will be always with us".

AB: How have the actual research facilities and buildings on campus changed?

GH: More of them!

AB: More of them?

GH: Yes. The, the...I suppose the whole library system has improved terrifically. Not only here, but in the fact that we now have access to a sort of complete Nova Scotia network has been, clearly, a big help. When I started here, the library was one room, where the Engineering drafting room is now, and that was it! And, the, and then the building that's now the Education building was built as a library, and then the present library was built. But other than that, there couldn't be any other change, other than the advances of technology. Supposedly, we can sit here now and get any book, anywhere, if we want.

AB: Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to add?

GH: No.

AB: Sounds good.

tape ends