

**Oral History Interview with Dr. Robert Bollini
conducted by Angela Baker, May 25, 1993
Transcription by Anne MacLean, July 22, 1999**

AB: Okay, can you state your full name please?

RB: Yeah. My name is Robert Bollini. B-O-L-L-I-N-I.

AB: And what is your date, and place of birth?

RB: August 1st, 1933.

AB: And where were you born?

RB: Massachusetts.

AB: Massachusetts? Could you describe your educat...

RB: interrupts the interviewer. What are we reviewing about?

AB: Urn.

RB: What are you interviewing me for?

AB: The history of Saint Mary's, but first I do, like, some background.

RB: Oh, I see. Okay.

AB: I find out who you are and what you were doing here.

RB: Yeah.

AB: So, what's your educational background?

RB: Oh! How far back?

AB: University.

RB: Yeah. Well, I have a B.A. from Cornell, and I have, I've forgotten it exactly but I think it is Biology, or Zoology or something. And I have a Master's degree in Linguistics from Georgetown. And I have a Ph.D. in History from Berkeley.

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

RB: Oh I started here in September, 1966.

AB: And what was your position then?

RB: The same.

AB: The same? History professor?

RB: Um-hum.

AB: Okay. So how has your world changed at the university since you've been here, over the years?

RB: Hasn't! Remarkably little.

AB: Really?

RB: That's right. That's right. The interesting thing about it was that, from the first, when Jack MacCormack¹ was chair, and Saint Mary's was just beginning to hire, along with the other Canadian universities. There was a great expansion of Canadian universities from the mid-60s on. And Saint Mary's participated because there was a great influx of government money, suddenly, for the post-secondary level. And the universities, in Canada, as you probably know were, wereWas that a tap on the door?

AB: Yeah.

RB: Just a second.

Tape stops

Tape resumes

RB: What was I saying?

AB: Talking about the influx of money.

RB: Yes. Influx of money and with it an influx of, of, Ph.Ds. Many of them from the United States, as you know, because, because there were Ph.Ds, universities in Canada did not give very many Ph.Ds. There were only one or two, University of Toronto, that gave Ph.Ds that were universally respected. And suddenly, everyone wanted to have Ph.Ds, as a sign of maturity, of the universities maturing. And we got hired. Several of my colleagues came to Canada, with me, various places, coast to coast. And, when I got here, I moved into an area that was remarkably easy going, pleasant. I taught whatever I liked. I did the first year, Jack MacCormack asked me to teach a course in English History. I had, I had, a minor in English History without really knowing much about it. So, I worked that out along with a Western Civ.² course and I've forgotten what else. But that was the only time in, in all the years I've been here that I've ever been asked to teach a

¹Dr. Bollini is referring to John R. MacCormack who was the Chairman of the Department of History between 1960-69.

² Transcriber assumes Dr. Bollini is referring to *Civilization in the West*, which was first offered in the 1967-68 calendar.

course. Every other course that I've taught, I suggested, and, and I was permitted to teach it.

AB: So, what difference have you noted in the faculty members that you've worked with, through the years?

RB: It would be hard to say. I would think, I perhaps people of my generation tended to have long periods of their lives when they were not in school. They worked for government, or corporations, or they were in the Army or some such thing. Probably the biggest single change I've noticed now is that almost everyone who is hired has never been out of school.

AB: I see. Do you notice any changes in the age of professors? Or gender?

RB: Of course as I get older, they get younger! That's, that is the case. I, I notice that the university tends to hire at the lowest rank possible. ALL universities do, because it saves money, so they tend to hire at the assistant professor level if possible. Somebody just coming out of, just finishing a Ph.D., and they of course tend to be young. Although the American Historical Association has published interesting data in which something like sixty percent, as I remember, sixty percent of Ph.Ds, now, awarded in the American system are between the age of forty and sixty-five. Twenty-two percent are older than sixty years of age. I find that hard to believe and I can't understand what they would do with it? But my wife seems to suggest it is women who have raised a family, and who have launched themselves on a career that pleases them. They're probably financially independent and simply need do only what intrigues them. So they, they take Ph.Ds, and, and the universities are willing to guide them through their graduate studies. What role they could fill I don't know. I mean, a man sixty can scarcely be hired because he couldn't fit into a pension plan. Certainly not in an American university where you have to fit in a health plan. But that's the major difference. I noticed Religious Studies, for example, just hired somebody. She's just getting her Ph.D. and she's a middle-aged woman.

AB: I see. Comment on the changes in the size of the University while you've been here. What effect do you think.....

RB: Well again, I don't notice that. The University has grown enormously, but I don't see that. Mainly because kids have almost no background in Europe anymore. When I first began here, everybody who finished high school had European training in European History. Now, almost no, now in fact, nobody does. It's scarcely taught. I'm not at all sure it's taught here. So... When I began to teach Western Civ., for example, which was an obligatory course, the classes were enormous. Enormous. We used to teach two hundred people in Western Civ. After Western Civ. was removed as a requirement, the size of my classes became very manageable, very comfortable, and stayed that way ever since. So I've never had any difficulty with the university's size.

AB: Okay. The University became officially co-educational in '68. Did you notice a difference with the entrance of, and growing population of female students, in your courses?

RB: Well, again, coming from Berkeley, no I didn't notice anything like that. I'd never been to an all-male school, so I, I, it was a little strange that first year when it was mostly boys, but when it corrected to girls that seemed to be perfectly natural.

AB: Did you find any, any domination of one gender over another over the years?

RB: Oh no! No. No. Never have, never have. That may just be a certain insensitivity on my part, but no I never have.

AB: All right. Around 1970, the school became secular too. Did you notice any changes when the Jesuits³ left?

RB: Well, apart from losing the Jesuits. That was a, that was a real blow because the Jesuits provided a kind of, kind of maturity and a national academic muscle which Saint Mary's has never regained. And I'm sorry about that. It's a pity. Saint Mary's became, in many ways, Saint Mary's became a provincial university when the Jesuits left. And it's never been able to find its way back to the kind of possibilities that the Jesuits gave it.

AB: Okay. Unionization took place in the mid-seventies....

RB: I didn't hear?

AB: Unionization.

RB: Yeah.

AB: For the faculty members..

RB: That's right.

AB: What type of effect did that have?

RB: Oh, that had a major effect. That had a major effect. But you probably know the stories of that. There was a, a, a Presidential regime, which was determined to change Saint Mary's in certain directions, fairly ill-formed directions. And in order for that to be accomplished, there were arbitrary firings, faculty reacted. Largely because, by this time, and I really, I really do think this is a factor, a great many of the faculty members were Americans or Brits, and simply not used to the old regime under which Canadian universities used to operate. Where universities were private fiefdoms of, usually of their president, or certainly of various sectarian denominations that ran them. Most, as you know, most Canadian universities were affiliated, very strictly affiliated, and only a few did not fit that definition. When, when the practices which were no doubt commonplace before I came here, when those practices were continued into the late sixties and seventies, it was a violent reaction on the part of younger faculty members who had no

experience in this, and who had trained in universities that had long since established faculty governance as a rule. And that was instrumental in changing the shape of, not only Saint Mary's, which was one of the first, I think was the first, to become unionized. All of Canadian, all of the Canadian universities, or virtually all of them.

AB: So what changes have you noted in the Academic programs at Saint Mary's?

RB: Well, it does seem to me the curriculum has gotten to, to use a curmudgeonly phrase, the curriculum has gotten soft. I think that there have been a terrible inflation of grades. But I read somewhere in the literature, recently, that that's true. Somebody was complaining of that at Princeton, so I expect that's pretty universal now. [pause] There was, when I first got here, there was still a Canon. This infamous Canon, of which we hear so much. And it was probably the case that Canon deserved a serious and skeptical look. But it was destroyed with the creation of the new, the new B.A., and the new B.A. was poorly thought out. It's never been revised. The new B.A., I say new - it's been in place what twenty years, the B.A. was so poorly thought out, that the one requirement, it seemed to me, the one requirement that should have been laid on every single undergraduate, that he or she learn something - learn how to write an essay. And, and come to expect that they would be required to read closely, some basic texts. That requirement vanished, and has never been replaced. In that sense, Saint Mary's, for all the ornamentation that has since been hung on it, in that sense, Saint Mary's has declined in quality from the standards that were set by, by Canadian High Schools that were in the sixties and seventies far better than they are now. And by university faculty members who were simply accustomed to demanding that sort of standard from the student.

AB: What changes have you noted in the course offerings over the years? Do, do people coming to universities tend to go in different directions than they did?

RB: I wouldn't know that. I'm sorry.

AB: All right. Okay. In regards to ...

RB: That's it?

AB: No, no. Not yet.

RB: Okay.

AB: In regards to the student population have you noticed any differences in regards to age, gender, ethnic origin of your students over the years?

RB: Well, we always used to get. Saint Mary's is always good in, in, in having for us, mature students. We got military, and we got, of course in the late sixties and seventies teachers were frantically upgrading. And we had a great many adults, even then. But typically we had them in the summer. And, apart from that, I don't see an awful lot of mature students around the corridors, even today, during the school year proper. It's still too hard, I think,

for most adults to insert themselves into an academic year. You see more, certainly you see, well I can't even say that. I was going to say you would see more minorities but in those days we used to get a great many people from, from, not a great many, but a significant fraction of people from the States. People whose parents were Maritimers, and who had emigrated to the States. People who played, particularly, basketball. Football players tended to avoid the history department because we were much too hard on them. But the basketball players were, by and large, a hell of a lot smarter. And we had some wonderful students from places like King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. That, then the province, of course, put a premium, that obliged those kids to pay a very stiff premium to come to Canada. Understandably. But again, Saint Mary's lost something, something important that has never been replaced.

AB: So have you noted any difference in the family background of students who have come?

RB: Well, with the rising costs you see, the kids tend to be more and more middle-class. They tend to be able, they tend to be kids who can afford university and that means they are either kids from fairly affluent backgrounds, or they're older, young people who have saved for a year, or who have a good job that they can keep while they're coming to school. Post office, for example. Wonderful student this year who was slept about two hours a night because he worked at the Post Office and came to school full time.

AB: What do you think students wish to gain from their educational experiences at Saint Mary's? Do you think that that has changed over the years - what they expect to learn?

RB: Well, they expect it. They reckon that is was a ticket up. And we used to get, I guess we still do, get a very significant fraction of rural kids from, at Saint Mary's. And it was expected that that would be a real leg up, from the kind of future that was available to them in the absence of university. I think that, that's pretty, that's still pretty much the same. Everybody reckons that the B.A. is a ticket to public responsibility of some kind or other. And that's certainly true. Expect that when they have the B.A., they will discharge public responsibility, and so they will, sooner or later. You may not believe that, but in two or three years you will have a job, my dear, I promise ya.

AB: 'Kay. How do you feel that, that Saint Mary's compares academically to other institutions across Nova Scotia and Canada, in general?

RB: Oh, I it's perfectly, perfectly comparable. They are, all of them, I think, undemanding, to put the best light on them. They are all of them undemanding, but that's the nature of universities that have open admissions, and until very recently, virtually all Nova Scotia institutions and post-secondary studies, except the technical schools, had open admissions. Everybody got a crack at it. They were, after all, that's why they had been established. That was the hope, that the reorganization in the sixties and seventies, Canadians could bring the level of, of attendance at post-secondary schools to something like the American level, where you have, I think, if I remember correctly, in the U.S., almost a third of high school graduates find themselves, for however short a time, at

some post-secondary education, post-secondary institution. And I think the, I think it was the idea that Canada should emulate that, and I think in that respect, it's really has done a remarkable job of, of it. When I got here, a university graduate was a rather exotic creature, and it was a well-schooled Canadian, was very often, someone who had gone, who had finished high school. Having said that, you must not understand that except in terms of those high schools, people who had finished the, the old course of studies in high school - literate, extremely well-spoken, had a broad background in History and Literature. Canonical background. Granted it was standard stuff. They knew the kings of England, they knew who Tennyson was. But it seems to me, that much more could be said of that canonical vision of the world than the absence, the absolute absence, of any vision of the world which is now largely the responsibility of the high schools.

AB: Okay. Comment on the research facilities available at Saint Mary's. Do you think they are adequate?

RB: Well there's, we have, the Library has been generous with us. But there's no way you could talk about there being present in Nova Scotia, library facilities adequate to Ph.D. studies, except in some areas. Canadian, perhaps in some aspects of American, I don't know. But with Novanet much has changed. It's surprising how many, how many secondary works, at least. And that's a big part of research - how many secondary works are out there. Once you begin to see them arrayed on your computer screen, thanks to Novanet. I can't say how, how interesting that's been, especially to someone who's interested as I am in the development of, of illustration and representational art.

AB: Okay. Is there anything you would like to add? On the, any of the answers?

RB: No, I don't think so. You've seemed to have touched all of the bases. I, you have allowed me a certain amount of grumpiness, and, I think whatever I had to say is on your tape.

AB: Great!

End of tape