

## GEORGE EDWIN BRITNELL, 1903–1961

THE death of George Britnell on October 14, 1961, after an illness of several months, was a great loss to scholarship and to university and public life. His passing bereaved a host of friends in Canada and in other countries. He was an outstanding scholar and teacher, a gifted administrator, a devoted public servant, and an untiring worker in the community interest at every level from the local through the national to that of the Commonwealth and beyond.

Born at Wimbledon, England, on June 9, 1903, Britnell came to Canada in April, 1910, and attended school for a year at Stoney Creek, Ontario, while his father went to find land in the fabulous west. He homesteaded in Saskatchewan, on the eastern margins of the "pre-emption area," the massive territory rejected by the land-grant railways as too irregular in rainfall to be "fairly fit for settlement" within the meaning of their grants, and thrown open for settlement by the Dominion Lands Act of 1908. Scarcity of free lands elsewhere and exceptionally favourable moisture conditions in 1909 and earlier years fostered the speedy occupation of the region. The Britnell homestead was seven miles from market at Macrorie and within a score of miles of the dam now under construction for the South Saskatchewan River irrigation project. The family moved to the neighbourhood in 1911 and to the homestead in 1913. There Britnell grew up, took primary education in the frontier rural school, passed entrance examinations in 1918 and, in winters between seasons of farm work, attended school to complete Grade IX by 1920.

Neither range nor intensity of later interests or activities erased the imprint of these early years or separated Britnell entirely from the Macrorie farm community. The rigours and uncertainties of a livelihood dependent on wheat growing with uncertain rainfall and more uncertain prices, the real and imaginary injustices encountered on a capital-poor frontier, the isolation, the absence of amenities and community services, the struggle for independence and an education—these shaped the man. They created a life-long understanding and compassion for the exposed, the vulnerable, the exploited, whether individuals or entire communities or regions. Britnell owned farm land at Macrorie until his death. Whatever the season he could tell the precise stage and state of the farming operations conducted by his brother on the home farm. He knew whether seeding or summerfallow was just completed, the moisture situation, the harvest prospect, when the last round was made by the harvester-combine and, finally, the latest word on the delivery quota. The single day or two stolen each year from relentless work for a drive to the farm with members of his family provided depths of satisfaction which he found in no other way.

Neither opportunity nor common example favoured education beyond minimum levels in the Saskatchewan rural environment of the 1920's. Britnell acknowledged a tremendous debt of gratitude to his teacher, Mrs. Harry Hall, for intellectual stimulation and for early and lasting encouragement to continue his studies. With no high school readily available he enrolled in a Lutheran college at Outlook some twenty miles away. There he found particular challenge in the views of the principal concerning social and political

reform. When these views led to the severance of the principal's connection with the college in mid-winter 1923, Britnell and a kindred spirit packed up and left in sympathy. He went to Prince Albert Collegiate to complete the term and a year later, in 1924, graduated with the Governor General's gold medal.

The prospect for university remained uncertain. Meanwhile he worked for the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool and on the home farm, he operated the post office in Macrorie for a summer, he wrote for the *Western Producer*—an employment commenced in high school—and he read voraciously in his spare time. Finally enrolled at the University of Saskatchewan in 1926, he registered in the general Arts course and showed no early inclination to specialize. He studied English including a class in Victorian poetry, Latin, German, history and economics, and biology for the unavoidable "lab class." Although F. H. Underhill and R. MacG. Dawson were successively professors of political science at Saskatchewan during his three years as an undergraduate student he apparently had no formal contact with them or with their subject. He took a class in political philosophy in the philosophy department. A. S. Morton was then at the height of his powers in the history department and Britnell studied with him. He took economics from W. W. Swanson, W. A. Carrothers and R. McQueen, the latter undoubtedly exercising a powerful and lasting influence on his interests and intellectual development. He continued to write for the *Western Producer* and was active in debating and public speaking.

On what seems to have been a sudden or at least belated resolve he turned to Law in his final year, took extra classes and fulfilled the requirements for the Arts degree in 1929 with electives from a nearly-complete first year in Law—a foundation to which he added unobtrusively in later years. He was awarded the Carswell Company prize for the highest marks in his Law exams and won the IODE Overseas Fellowship for 1929–30.

After a year at the London School of Economics and Political Science in which the highlights were lectures from Laski, endless reading, wide travel and a stint in Fleet Street he was appointed Instructor in Economics at the University of Saskatchewan, July 1, 1930, at a salary of \$1800 a year. His appointment was renewed a year later at an advance of \$5 per month. This was wiped out by an economy wave before he lifted his first enlarged cheque and his total salary was reduced to \$1500. In 1932 the revenues of the province were cut by drought and depression from \$16.5 million to less than \$12 million and university departments were required to reduce staff by placing junior members on leave of absence at one-quarter salary. Britnell seized the opportunity to go to Toronto on a scholarship. He completed most of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree within the year and the remainder while back teaching at Saskatchewan during the year 1933–34. In 1935–36 he was Lecturer in Economics at the University of Toronto. In 1936 he was appointed Assistant Professor of Economics at Saskatchewan and in 1938 he received the Ph.D. degree from Toronto. At the same time, a year after Dawson's departure for Toronto, Britnell was appointed to replace him as Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science, a position he held until 1945.

By 1939 the pattern but not the scope of Britnell's life work was well established in both its intra- and extra-mural fields. From the first he had been a clear and provocative teacher, a vigorous and forthright lecturer. For those enrolled in his classes he had small patience for the socialite, none for the drone, little for the unimaginative. For the working student aware of the world in which he lived, with even the smallest spark of intellectual curiosity, he provided abrasive stimulus and blunt challenge. His lectures were prepared and organized with meticulous care. It was against his nature to skimp on any task and the teaching of even the most familiar subject matter merited, in his opinion, preparatory review. He had no use for instruction that relied on a jotted heading or two to be rounded out by rambling improvisation. As the years passed by he was, if possible, more rather than less exacting in his self-imposed standards of preparation for classroom teaching. The lecture notes for at least his upper-year classes were typed and retyped; they were revised annually and typed again. Yet with all this fixity of subject matter and formality of expression his students uniformly testified to classroom experiences of great and sustained vitality.

*The Wheat Economy*, published in 1939, and the half dozen articles which preceded it clearly projected the characteristic features of Britnell's impressive subsequent output of scholarly publications. One of a series sponsored jointly by the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the Institute of Pacific Relations the book was a detailed and painstaking analysis of the standard of living in Saskatchewan. The study took shape through the years of maximum economic calamity in the prairie provinces and the hardships so vividly portrayed in the volume were the realities of the author's first-hand experience and observation rather than academic abstractions. In a number of his later publications he examined at irregular intervals the varying fortunes of the wheat economy through war and postwar readjustments. In others he assessed standards of living in distant areas such as Guatemala and southeast Africa where the economic and political vulnerability of the frontier revealed wholly unexpected similarities with his home economy.

Some of Britnell's writings during the 1940's and 1950's represented research undertaken specifically for publication. Others emerged from consultative assignments and might be regarded as by-products of the policy-making process. Regardless of their occasion or purpose they were prepared with the same exacting and scholarly care and with rigorous regard for the assumption that policy formulation merits and necessitates a full understanding of all relevant circumstances and their interrelations.

In August, 1937, Britnell was persuaded to cut short an exploratory tour of the Maritimes to go to Regina and, jointly with F. C. Cronkite, to prepare the Saskatchewan Government's brief for presentation to the Rowell-Sirois Commission. Within three months an impressive, book-length document was ready and in print. Its elaborate factual base drew heavily on Britnell's researches for *The Wheat Economy*, not yet published. The argument was closely reasoned and persuasive. The preparation and defence of this submission was his first experience of consequence in counselling government. It showed conclusively his ability to utilize academic training and research

skill in the furtherance of the understanding so essential to intelligent and realistic policy formulation. During the summer of 1938 he assisted in the study of national income as a member of the economic research staff of the Rowell-Sirois commission in Ottawa—one of the very few Canadian economists surely who were called to advise Dominion and provincial governments simultaneously in the disputed area of Dominion-provincial fiscal relations. In 1940–41 he was chairman of a Dominion royal commission on the cost of living in the coal mining industry of Alberta and British Columbia and, in 1941, he headed a similar commission on the industry in Saskatchewan. From 1941 to 1944 he was in Ottawa as economic adviser to the Wartime Prices and Trade Board.

Britnell welcomed opportunities to travel. In 1936 he was a delegate to the sixth conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations at Yosemite and, in 1938, to the second British Commonwealth Relations Conference at Sydney, Australia. He spent the summer of 1939 touring the British Isles and returned home only on the eve of war. While serving with the Wartime Prices and Trade Board he went as a member of the Canadian delegation to the International Conference on Food and Agriculture held in Hot Springs, Virginia, in 1943.

In 1940 he married Pauline May Paulson, daughter of W. H. Paulson who had served continuously as Liberal MLA for the constituency of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, from 1912 to 1934. To the frank amazement of some at least of his closest friends he settled quickly and with apparent ease into the role of model husband and devoted family man. Among his intimates he freely extolled the virtues of domesticity and unabashedly proclaimed his pride in home and family.

Relinquishing his post with the Wartime Prices and Trade Board in 1944, he served for a year as chairman of the Economic Advisory Committee for the newly-elected CCF government in Regina. In 1945 he returned to the University of Saskatchewan as Professor and Head of the Department of Economics and Political Science, a position which he held until his death. He was special adviser to the Saskatchewan government from 1945 to 1951. In 1946 he was appointed chairman of a group which was later formalized as the Saskatchewan Economic and Technical Committee on Transportation and Freight Rates, a position which he held continuously thereafter. From 1948 to 1951 he was a member of a three-man committee engaged in preparing a report for the provincial government on provincial-municipal relations. From May, 1950, to August, 1951, he was chief of an economic mission to Guatemala for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In 1957 he was Commonwealth member of the Royal Commission on Federal-Provincial Fiscal Relations for the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. This assignment provided the occasion for a working visit of several weeks, accompanied by his wife, to Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. From 1957 to 1959 he was a member of the Dominion Royal Commission on Energy.

Chairmanship of the Saskatchewan Technical and Economic Committee on Transportation and Freight Rates entailed the most continuous and in many ways the most arduous of Britnell's off-campus public services throughout the

fifteen postwar years. A glance at the list of his publications after 1945 will show the extent to which his research and writing were tied in with advisory duties relating to transportation. He appeared repeatedly in Ottawa as a witness for the province. His last major public service was to advise and represent the Saskatchewan government in its appearances before the MacPherson Royal Commission on Transportation starting in 1959. This required him to direct and collaborate in the preparation of the provincial submissions and necessitated a dozen trips to hearings in Ottawa and other distant centres, the whole reaching practical *finale* in a gruelling week presenting and defending the Saskatchewan submission on the witness stand in Ottawa in September, 1960.

Britnell was a member of the Social Science Research Council of Canada from 1947 to 1960 except for the years 1951 to 1953 and had a voice in the formulation of its policies at crucial stages in its development. He was continuously active as member or chairman for a dozen successive years on its various committees for the awarding of grants in aid of research and pre-doctoral fellowships, and for the selection of candidates for professorial leaves of absence. He was chairman of the Council from 1956 to 1958 and thus had responsibility for leadership in the consultations concerned with establishing the lines of authority and function between the older and continuing organization and the newly-created Canada Council. Nearer home he was a member of the Saskatoon Library Board from 1951 to 1954 and vice-president of the Saskatchewan Archives Board from 1945 until his death.

Improbable as it may appear, Britnell accomplished the great body of advisory and other off-campus activities in the last fifteen years of his life without a single leave of absence of any significant extent. He was on leave for the year 1954-55 as research professor at the University of Toronto. Otherwise, from the time of his return to the University of Saskatchewan in 1945 until his fatal illness in 1961 he taught and administered the Department of Economics and Political Science without assistance or relief. No matter how many enterprises he conducted at a particular time, not the least detail of responsibility at the university or elsewhere was neglected or slighted. There remained, of course, practically no time for vacation from year to year and none for anything even distantly approaching relaxation from week to week.

Regardless of the range and intensity of Britnell's outside activities his heart was unwaveringly fixed in his attachment to the university. He repeatedly declined attractive offers of employment in government and private business. Except for the newspaper work of his earlier years he rarely if ever disposed of the services of his intellect to a non-public agency for compensation. He undertook advisory work with governments as a public obligation and only on terms of complete political independence and on the understanding that his duties would not require severance from the university. He was convinced of the extreme complexity of policy formation in the public sphere and felt obliged to assist within the close limits of his knowledge and research capacities. While holding the master planner in something akin to contempt, at the same time he had little patience with the ivory tower recluse and no great regard for elegant and esoteric models completely abstracted from

reality. He might be classified more properly as a political economist than as either an economist or a political scientist *sans phrase*.

As for his concept of a university, in his opinion the teaching scholar, regardless of his rank, was the central and perhaps the only indispensable figure in the university community. Himself an exceptionally strong department head and a powerful committee worker he nevertheless insisted that administrative functions existed only to facilitate and further the teaching scholar's work. He held this to be a truism, although one all too commonly denied or overlooked. Teaching and research he regarded as properly complementary and, in the social sciences at least, as scarcely capable of independent survival. He was certain that university teaching could not maintain effectiveness and intellectual challenge without constant refreshment from the research efforts of the teacher. The question whether effective research could exist in a university without being closely linked with teaching, he did not bother to consider in the abstract. He simply held that members of his department should occupy essentially teaching posts with research and writing assumed to be indispensable complementary interests.

He refused to subscribe to the classification of university teachers as first or second class citizens depending on whether they taught only advanced and graduate classes on the one hand or elementary classes on the other. In his view the effective instruction of elementary students is a legitimate university function and at the same time one of the most exacting and difficult tests of a working scholar's competence. He felt that neither the freshman nor the teaching novice deserved to be abandoned exclusively to the mercies of the other. With few exceptions, and then only when unavoidable, every probationary member of his department was given a teaching programme comprising both elementary and upper classes. Even the senior members continued to share the instruction of elementary students by deliberate assignment. Britnell himself taught a section of an elementary class throughout his entire university career.

His work as a department head showed that he was an effective and imaginative builder. He commanded wholehearted respect and loyalty, and this for many reasons. His integrity and fairness were unquestioned in matters of the smallest as well as the greatest import. His scholarly abilities in research, writing and instruction prompted emulation. He was deeply interested in the welfare of his colleagues. He continually sought their advancement and, if the need arose, was fiercely protective in their behalf. He rejoiced in their honours and recognitions. He encouraged them to take leave of absence on scholarship or exchange appointment without regard for his own convenience.

He was always willing to see his students and discuss their studies and difficulties. He personally supervised much of the graduate work and consulted on every programme of specialization. Few areas of extra-curricular student activities aroused him to enthusiasm but no one who came to him with a problem of genuine intellectual concern could justly accuse him of disinterest.

Britnell was much honoured in his lifetime but most of the formal tributes that came his way were garbed in working rather than purely com-

plementary titles. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1950 and president of the Canadian Political Science Association in 1956. He was selected as the first Harold Innis Visiting Research Professor of Political Economy at the University of Toronto for the year 1954–55 and was participant in the council meeting and symposium on world inflation held by the International Economic Association in Denmark in September, 1959. The mark of his work and leadership will long remain in Canadian academic and public life.

He will be warmly remembered by a multitude of friends. With little interest in casual or inconsequential association, he had an exceptional capacity for deep and lasting friendship. He was never too busy for an office chat or an evening's visit at home. He was an engaging conversationalist with a fine sense of humour, a raconteur of no mean ability, and altogether a gracious host.

V. C. FOWKE

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