

# A History of The University of Alberta

1908-1969

Walter H. Johns

The University of Alberta Press





Dr. Henry Marshall Tory  
1908-1928



Dr. W. A. R. Kerr  
1936-1941



Dr. R. C. Wallace  
1928-1936

## The Presidents of The University of Alberta 1908-1969



Dr. Robert Newton  
1941-1950



Dr. Andrew Stewart  
1950-1959



Dr. Walter H. Johns  
1959-1969



the Director of Extension, as its representatives. The provincial government's intention was to secure a commercial licence to help meet the costs of the capital expenditure and also the increase in operating costs, but permission to have the licence changed from the educational category to the commercial was never obtained from Ottawa, nor could the license be transferred from the university to the province. Negotiations were to continue for decades on this matter without effect.

Throughout the war CKUA scheduled an interesting program of news, comment, debates, forums, and music. Many members of the university faculty participated. They received no fees for their contributions, but only the honour of being "on the air."

Although President Kerr met the many problems of his office and dealt with them as effectively as the circumstances of war and a restricted budget permitted, he was to end his long and distinguished career at the University of Alberta with an onerous problem from an unexpected source, which was completely beyond his powers to cope with. It had to do with the matter of an honorary degree.

The nomination and award of such degrees was normally a routine matter handled by the Senate Committee of Honorary Degrees which comprised the Chancellor, the Chairman of the Board, the President, the Provost, the deans of all the faculties, and the Registrar as secretary. It met regularly early in the calendar year to consider nominations from all sources and to decide on the recommendations it could make to the Senate which, of course, had the final decision on the awarding of all degrees, honorary or in course. When the committee had reached agreement it was the President's function to consult the nominees to find out whether they would be willing to accept the honour and to attend Convocation for that purpose, since the degree was not normally conferred *in absentia*. One of the recipients was usually invited to deliver the Convocation address. Senate approval was a formality since the spring meeting of the Senate was usually held on the morning of Convocation itself, or on the preceding day.

In 1941 the committee met on 4 February with Chancellor Rutherford, President Kerr, Mr. Parlee, the Chairman of the Board, Deans Weir, G.M. Smith, and Wilson, and the Registrar present. It was agreed that honorary degrees should be conferred on the Honourable William Aberhart, the Premier of Alberta, Minister of Education and Attorney-General; and on Mr. C.A. Magrath, a prominent Alberta pioneer. Mr. Magrath had been active in irrigation develop-



ment in southern Alberta and had been a member of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories before 1905, the first Mayor of Lethbridge, and later a Member of Parliament and Chairman of the International Waterways Commission. The invitations were duly extended by President Kerr, but Mr. Magrath was unable to accept due to ill health. The committee met again on 2 April, with almost the full complement of members present, and after confirming the action of the previous meeting, they agreed to invite Mr. Francis Gilbert Roe, a leading amateur historian of western Canada, to accept the honorary degree of Master of Arts. It was further agreed that the Senate would meet on 12 May, but that Convocation would be postponed to 19 May "due to the attendance of men at military camp." Premier Aberhart and Mr. Roe accepted the invitation. Dr. Kerby, the principal of Mount Royal College, readily agreed to present his old friend the Premier.

The Senate duly met at 10:00 a.m. on 12 May in the Senate Chamber, with Mr. Parlee presiding in the absence of Chancellor Rutherford, who arrived at 10:40 a.m., but declined to take the chair. The first item of business having to do with the activities of the Military Committee was quickly resolved.

The next item was the recommendations from the Committee on Honorary Degrees. President Kerr, as chairman of the committee, presented the *unanimous* recommendations of the committee of which the first was that the degree of Doctor of Laws be awarded to Premier Aberhart, whose contributions to the field of education had included:

- i. the substitution of large divisions, under superintendents, for the former small school districts
- ii. a teachers' pension system
- iii. important reforms in the school curriculum including reduction in the number of formal examinations
- iv. elevation of certificated teachers into a professional class with a College of Education in the University
- v. incorporation of School Trustees as a body corporate

The recommendation concluded with the statement: "Ever since his accession to power he has shown himself a warm friend of higher education and of the Provincial University of Alberta." The second recommendation was that the honorary degree of Master of Arts be conferred on Francis Gilbert Roe.



The recommendation regarding Mr. Roe was considered first and was passed unanimously. When the motion regarding the Premier was made by Dr. Kerr and seconded by Dr. Kerby, there was considerable discussion and a motion was passed that voting be by secret ballot. When the ballots were counted it was revealed that the motion to award Mr. Aberhart an honorary degree was defeated: seventeen for, eighteen against. The Senate went on to other business on its heavy agenda, but in the afternoon, when most of the regular business had been completed, the minutes record that the chairman, Mr. Parlee, asked:

that in the interests of the University and because of the gravity of the situation, the question of conferring an honorary degree on the Hon. Mr. Aberhart be re-opened. [He said that] some mention had been made during the morning regarding communication with the recipient. This had been done and should be done by the Committee, but it remained for the Senate body to confirm the action of the Committee.

The Senate then agreed to adjourn for thirty minutes, and reassembled at 4:15 p.m. A motion was put by secret ballot to reconsider the motion of the morning and was passed, eighteen to thirteen. Then there was a motion to rescind the motion of the morning respecting an honorary degree for the Premier. Again the motion was taken by secret ballot, and again it was defeated by a single vote: sixteen to fifteen.

A motion was then passed that

in view of the discussion, a new motion take the place of the motion passed this morning; that in view of the fact that the Senate Committee did not report to the Senate until within one week of convening, that Senate is opposed to granting any honorary degrees this year and in future any honorary degrees conferred by them must be placed by them before the meeting of the Senate in the fall. Also in case of an emergency, a majority mail vote would be valid.

This was the official position of the Senate and hence of the university, but of course it fooled nobody, and although the Senate's deliberations at that time were not public, the story of the events of that day were soon common knowledge. *The Edmonton Bulletin*, in a front-page editorial on Wednesday, 14 May 1941, expressed what must have been the views of many citizens of Alberta:

## A Tactless Trick

More than two weeks ago, a competent committee of the Senate of the University of Alberta decided to ask Premier William Aberhart to deliver the convocation address on May 19.

As is customary in such cases, it was unanimously decided also to ask Mr. Aberhart to accept the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws on that occasion.

This invitation to speak and to accept an honorary doctorate was formally conveyed to the Premier by Dr. W.A.R. Kerr, President of the University. Mr. Aberhart signified his willingness to be the recipient of both these honors. It was then announced by Dr. Kerr in the press that Mr. Aberhart would speak on May 19 and would be awarded the degree offered him.

Two days ago, the full Senate met to arrange final details of the convocation. When the matter of honorary degrees came up, the Senate rejected the recommendation of its responsible committee and, twice on two secret ballots, flatly refused to confer a degree on Premier Aberhart.

The public would like to know why. The public is entitled to know why.

Because, as the matter stands now, this absurd affair appears to be one of the most despicable tricks, one of the most tactless fiascos and one of the most undignified procedures ever to occur in the Dominion of Canada.

Apart from all political considerations, there was every reason why Mr. Aberhart should have been accorded this honor. Before he entered political life he was a distinguished educationalist. As principal of the largest high school in Calgary, he had exercised, wisely and well, a tremendous influence on the youth of the province.

After he entered political life, he so revised and amended the public school system of Alberta that it stood head and shoulders above other provincial systems in Canada and was copied, in many details, by other provinces.

The committee of the Senate that recommended Mr. Aberhart for a degree realized his tremendous service to education. The full Senate, small and full of malice, could see only a political opponent.

The Senate committee rose above political considerations. The full Senate grovelled in front of them.

Now there is no affront to Mr. Aberhart in this petty business. No matter how one may feel personally towards Mr. Aberhart, everyone should realize that the inherent dignity in the office of the premiership is so far above the mean machinations of little men that it cannot be touched by them.



But there is an affront to the dignity of the University in this sorry affair. There is an affront to Dr. Kerr who was unwittingly made the instrument of what could only have been a calculated insult to Alberta's self-respect. There is an affront to the people of Alberta who are made ridiculous throughout Canada.

We may expect politics to be played in parliaments. We do not expect nor will the public permit politics to be played in universities.

This is a miserable trick that humiliates and degrades and makes ashamed every educated man and woman in the province. The public demands a full explanation from the majority of the Senate responsible for it.

*The Edmonton Journal* made no comment, though it carried a news report, as did *The Bulletin*.

The results of the Senate's action were manifold. Naturally the Premier did not attend Convocation in McDougall Church on 19 May, nor did Mr. Roe. There was no formal Convocation address, but Mr. D.E. Cameron, the Librarian, who was always called upon in such emergencies, gave his usual excellent talk to the largest graduating class in the history of the university.

The Senate's decision was a great blow to several of those most vitally concerned, especially to the Chancellor, the President, and the Chairman of the Board. Dr. Rutherford, himself the first Premier of the Province and the first Minister of Education, had been Chancellor for fifteen years, and now at the age of eighty-four he was in failing health. He presided at the Convocation on 19 May, but died a few weeks later, on 11 June. How much the action of the Senate had to do with his death may never be known, but it certainly cast a shadow over his last days of life.

On 20 May 1941, the President wrote to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council as follows:

Dear Sir:

Please accept my resignation as President of the University of Alberta.

I am taking this step because of the recent action of the Senate in rejecting a recommendation of its Committee on Honorary Degrees, of which I am a member, to confer the degree of LL.D. on the Honourable Mr. Aberhart. This action I consider unfair and unjust.

Mr. Parlee and I, never doubting that the recommendation of the Committee would be adopted by the Senate in accord with its invariable custom and practice, invited Mr. Aberhart to accept from the University the degree of LL.D. and to deliver the Convocation address.

In my opinion, the action of the Senate leaves me no other course than to tender my resignation as President.

I have delayed sending you this letter till Convocation should be over.

Faithfully yours,  
W.A.R. Kerr

Mr. Parlee sent a similar letter on the same day, and in almost identical words.

Dr. Kerr would normally have expected to continue in office until he began his retirement as of 1 October 1944, at the age of sixty-nine. A similar arrangement had been approved for a number of senior members of the faculty in order to provide them with an adequate pension. The Premier apparently wished Dr. Kerr to continue as President and asked him to do so, but Dr. Kerr wrote on 31 July saying that he had regretfully decided he must insist on his resignation being accepted, though he would continue to occupy the post until his successor was appointed. In his reply a week later the Premier agreed that the resignation should take effect as of 31 August 1941, and that Dr. Kerr would receive three months' salary as a retirement bonus. In this letter the Premier alluded to Dr. Kerr's ill health and wished him and Mrs. Kerr many happy years of retirement. (Dr. Kerr died about three years later, in 1944.)

This particular crisis demanded the utmost in sound advice, and, in Dr. G. Fred McNally, Premier Aberhart had a very wise and devoted Deputy Minister of Education, on whom he relied heavily on all matters affecting the university. Dr. McNally, as usual, had excellent guidance to offer with his usual combination of modesty and tact, as the following letter, written two months before Dr. Kerr's retirement illustrates:

May 23, 1941

From Dr. G. Fred McNally  
Deputy Minister of Education

To Hon. Mr. Aberhart,  
Premier & Minister of Education.

I should like to make two or three observations relative to the situation precipitated by the resignation of the President and the Chairman of the Governors of the University:



(1) Realizing the character of the opponents of the recommendation of the Senate's standing committee it is not unreasonable to expect that the charge will be made that these men were forced to resign because of the displeasure of the Government. Denial on behalf of the Government would have no more effect than the President's denial of pressure in the matter of the proposal to confer the degree in the first instance. If the Government could induce Mr. Parlee either to withdraw his resignation or to accept re-appointment, we should have the most effective answer to such a charge that could be given.

(2) It seems to me that the President should be invited to remain for a definite period, on the ground that in addition to selecting a successor it wishes to study certain matters, e.g. the government of the University, whether the courses offered are the ones calculated best to serve the people of the province as a whole, whether we can afford, in war time, to continue all the faculties we have at present, and similar questions. Whether this should be one or two years would be largely for him to decide.

(3) That only a very general announcement of the plans of the Government be given publicly, but that a small committee of picked people, say 5 or 7, be named soon and asked to begin their work at an early date. The identity of this committee should be kept secret and no announcements made as to its activity or progress except through you.

I hope that some part of this may be of value to you.

These suggestions were followed in so far as was possible. Though Dr. Kerr's resignation as President had to be accepted, Mr. Parlee was induced to continue as Chairman of the Board of Governors and proved to be a splendid source of leadership and support for the new President in the difficult years of the war and the postwar surge in enrolment. The suggestion of a survey committee was also followed, and resulted in a new University Act more suited to the expanding role of the university in the province.

In looking about for a successor to Dr. Kerr, the government soon placed Dr. Robert Newton, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, high on their list. In fact he had been seriously considered as a candidate in 1936, after the resignation of Dr. Wallace, and had Dr. Kerr not been such an obvious candidate at that time, Dr. Newton might have become President five years earlier. Now that he had returned to the University of Alberta and had immediately shown himself to be an excellent leader and administrator, he was the obvious candidate for the position vacated by Dr. Kerr. The Premier, however, moved with great caution, and his approaches are described by Dr.

Newton in his memoirs. He accepted the government's invitation to become Acting President as of 1 September 1941, and in the following year was confirmed in the office.\*

At the first meeting of the Board of Governors in the fall of 1941, resolutions regarding the late Chancellor and the retiring President were approved and prepared by Dr. Newton. That for Dr. Rutherford reads as follows:

The Board of Governors of the University of Alberta desires to place on record a tribute to the memory of Dr. Alexander Cameron Rutherford. The name of Dr. Rutherford is inseparably connected with the history of the University, first as its founder, always as its friend, and for the last fourteen years of his life as its Chancellor. He brought grace and dignity to his high offices, and seasoned his acts with kindness and courtesy. The members of the Board trust that Dr. Rutherford's relatives may find consolation in reflecting that he died full of years and honour.

(In later years the University acquired by purchase, and by gift from Dr. Rutherford's daughter, Mrs. Stanley McCuaig, the splendid collection of Canadiana which he had acquired during a long lifetime of judicious selection and purchase. Still later, the new university library was named in his honour. He was the man who had founded the university in 1908, and he remained its staunch friend for thirty-five years.)

The tribute to Dr. Kerr reads:

The Board of Governors of the University of Alberta desires to place on record its appreciation of the services of Dr. W.A.R. Kerr. For thirty-two years Dr. Kerr played a distinguished part in the life and work of the University. During the five years in which he occupied the high office of President, members of the Board have had opportunity to make his intimate acquaintance, and to appreciate his worth. They respect him as a fine English gentleman, they value him as a loyal friend, and they are grateful to him for his unselfish service to the cause of higher education in Alberta. It is their sincere hope that Dr. and Mrs. Kerr may enjoy good health during many years of well-earned leisure.

Dr. Kerr's own contribution to the university extended over a period of thirty-three years as professor, dean, and President. His last years, those of depression and war, were difficult ones for the university

\*For an account of the circumstances surrounding the appointment, see Dr. Newton's memoirs.



and for Dr. Kerr, but he never lost his patience, his courtesy, or his courage. Many of the decisions he had to make in the light of financial stringency were distasteful to him, but his colleagues on the faculty and the members of the student body knew he always did his best, and that his loyalty to the university and the cause of higher education was never in question. It was a matter of the greatest regret that this fine man and his friend and colleague, the Chancellor, should have had the last days of their lives darkened by an event that brought them undeserved sorrow.\*

\*A portrait in oils of Dr. Kerr by Dr. Egerton Pope is a part of the university's art collection; a small bust by Mrs. Ella Mae Walker, wife of the professor of Chemistry, is located in the reserve reading room of the Rutherford Library, a gift of the class of 1952, together with a framed scroll certifying his award as a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, conferred by the President of the French Republic on 7 February 1935, and the medal of that order; and a smaller portrait in pastels by N. de Grandmaison hangs in the entrance to the main reading room. A portrait in oils of Dr. Rutherford by Everett also hangs on the second floor in the library. There is, in addition, an official government portrait in the Legislature Building.