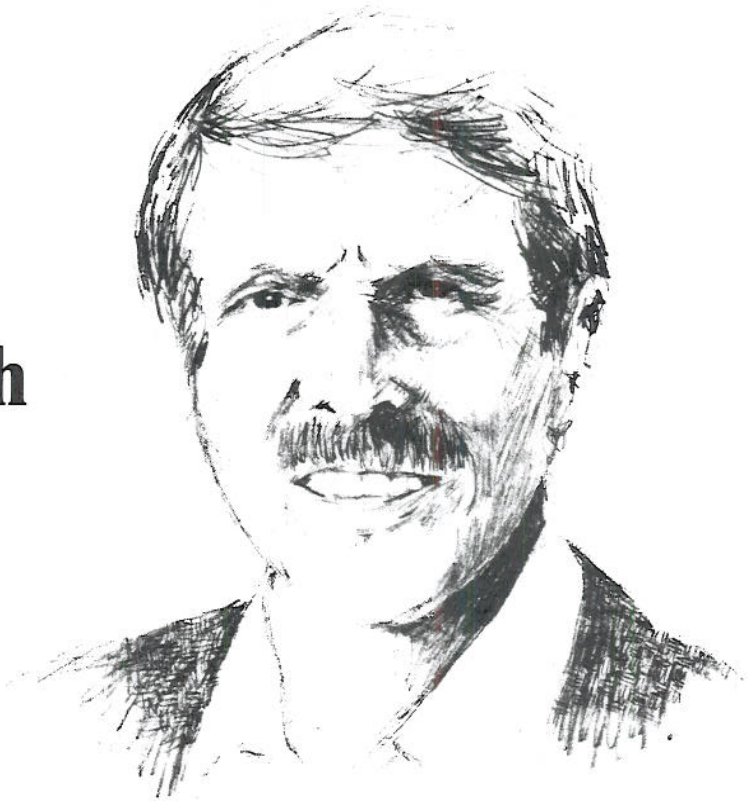


Vox

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An Interview With Peter Millard



Peter Millard was born in England in 1932. He later came to Canada and took his first degree from McGill, where he won the Shakespeare Gold Medal for English. Returning to England, Millard completed a B. A. at Wadham College, Oxford. He was first appointed at U. of S. as a Special Lecturer in 1964. Upon completing his D.Phil at Linacre College, Oxford in 1970 he was appointed as Assistant Professor. He later achieved the rank of Professor, and became Head of the Department of English in 1985, a position he held until his retirement. Starting in 1984 he served several terms on the Executive of the Faculty Association, and was Chair of the Association in 1987-88.

*In addition to his publications in the field of Eighteenth-Century Studies, Millard was active in fine arts, creative writing, and human rights. He published articles, reviews, and stories in such publications as *NeWest Review*, *The Malahat Review*, *Border Crossings*, *The Musk-ox*, *Arts and Culture of the North*,*

Arts West, and *The Body Politic*. He was the author of two books: *Stryjek: Trying the Colours* (Fifth House, 1988), and an edition of Roger North's *General Preface and Life of Dr. John North* (University of Toronto Press, 1984). His most recent publication was an analysis of human rights and the Conservative Government in the volume *Devine Rule in Saskatchewan*. He also gave many years of service to the local arts community, serving not only on the Art Committee of Council, but also as Trustee of the Mendel Art Gallery and Civic Conservatory. Long active in the human rights movement, Millard was for two years President of the Saskatchewan Association on Human Rights, and will be remembered for Coordinating an ambitious and highly successful AIDS Awareness Campaign on campus in 1991.

Millard retired from the University on December 31, 1991. The following interview between Millard and Vox Editorial Board member Douglas Thorpe took place on December 21, Professor Millard's last day in his office.

Vox: Let's go back to when you first came here from England. How did you, a recent graduate of Oxford, end up in Saskatchewan?

Millard: I'd been in Canada before, and had gone back to Oxford from McGill. I thought I didn't particularly want to come back to Canada, but I was very lazy and inefficient, and hadn't bothered to apply for a job anywhere. So there I was in springtime after my degree in Oxford with no work, and so I thought "what the hell I'll try Canada" and wrote to every single Canadian university. Saskatchewan replied, with a reply-paid cable (that's what really did it, I think), offering a huge salary, so I thought I'd come for a couple of years to see what it was like, and I've been here ever since.

Vox: You had no idea at the time that it would be permanent?

Millard: Absolutely not, and certainly not in Saskatchewan. Then the squeeze came in the trade and made it impossible to move anyway. But I've been quite happy here. It's a fulfilling life, a good life.

Vox: What were your first impressions of the university when you arrived? What kind of place did you think you had landed in?

Millard: It seemed like the other side of the moon, frankly. I came across Canada from Montreal by schoolbus — somebody I met on the ship was delivering a schoolbus to Edmonton. So we drove in this rattling yellow bus all the way across the country. We arrived on the prairies at dawn I remember. It was a brown-black dawn, over all this yellow stubble. It was very beautiful landscape but quite extraordinary. Then we arrived at this town, which was much smaller then, and this university. It's difficult now to describe the university then, for everything is so structured now, and everybody's so anxious. In those days it was much looser, much more friendly in a way, except that the authorities were somewhat mysterious. One ignored them — anyone who could read or write

got a job in those days so you never worried about tenure. So there were people running things, and in a very private, close-fisted way, but it didn't matter. President Spinks had control over the whole university. He was doing things and in charge of things that a President simply couldn't be now. It was much more personal in that way. When I was going to leave, for instance, President Spinks got hold of me and said no, don't leave, you can take paid leave of absence to go back to Oxford to do a D.Phil, on the understanding that I'd come back to Saskatoon for the same number of years that I'd been paid. He had the authority in those days to do that kind of thing, and he had the intimate knowledge of the campus.

So things were much looser, and rather more fun I must say. There were more parties in the English Department, and because the university was so desperate to get anyone, we used to have the most weird and wonderful characters turn up. It was like frontier Canada, where you get the misfits, the alcoholics, the serial killers, the eccentrics. It was wonderful.

Vox: The university is a very different place now. When did all this change?

Millard: In the seventies. It was gradual and yet perceptible. I remember sitting in Council and noting the events. It was a process, quite conscious on the part of Administration, to bring more and more decision-making powers into their aegis. The committees of Council were given less and less power. Part of this was necessary, of course, as the University had become very much bigger and decision-making had to be more streamlined but I think Administration overdid that. They wanted the power from Council and they took it, and it was Council's fault because we let them do it. They set up more and more elaborate structures within Administration to take over the decision-making powers so that Council became less and less important. This was accompanied by a contempt for Council from both President Begg and President Kristjanson. When Council said things that they approved of they would accept it as a recommendation, otherwise they would simply ignore it. Also, as the University grew larger there was a greater fragmentation. The territorial lines became more firmly-drawn between colleges, and even within colleges. When the job-market became much more difficult the tension increased. So its not quite the happy place it used to be.

Vox: Was it partly in response to these developments that the Faculty Association certified in the late seventies?

Millard: I didn't have much to do with that. In those days I was very apolitical, I'm ashamed to admit. I suppose it must have been. In the early days, as when Dr. Spinks offered me the paid leave, they were so anxious to keep you they would do anything they could, and so salaries weren't bad and life was fairly easy. Later on, it became more and more necessary to have protection.

Vox: Looking back now after a few years, what factors contributed to the strike in 1988?



Millard (right) being interviewed during the strike, March, 1988.

Millard: The university came of age with the strike. This process that I've been sketching continued, with an administration that was more and more centralized, more and more isolated, and more and more out of touch with the professors. An isolated administration that saw itself as beyond criticism. Also, and very important, was the worsening economic climate which had two effects: first of all it made it difficult to find money for things on campus such as the library, so that when the administration made decisions about where the money was going the effects of centralization became clearer; and secondly pressure was on the university to produce, to ask itself what it was doing. I think this is very important. For the first time in my experience at this university, professors asked themselves several questions: "What am I doing?" and "What is it worth?" They were surprised by the answer. What they were doing was of absolutely essential value and it was worth a hell of a lot. The other questions were "Who makes the decisions around here?" and "What are these decisions?" This was very important, and for the Administration to rationalize as they have, and find almost any reason for the strike — the most absurd being that Millard and Stewart caused it, which is ridiculous, and very insulting to faculty, and typical of Administration to insult faculty in that way — no matter how they rationalize it I think that's what happened. In the Association, and I was the Chair, we were astonished by what happened. We were trying to get members to think about their situations, but mainly in terms of our relative position with other universities, our career development. We weren't really thinking about the Library initially; that's the job of Council. But then we put in, as an afterthought, this clause about having input into the appointment of senior administrators, which is not technically speaking a matter for the Collective Agreement. It's a management matter, and certainly a Council matter, but we put it in anyway, as one of the things we might be able to throw out afterwards, in exchange for something else. To our surprise, that became the central issue during the strike, and looking back I can see that that was right, and that's why I think it was the University's coming-of-age. People around here thought "I want to know who's making decisions and I want some part in those decisions." It wasn't about money primarily. It was about the Library. It was about how we wanted to be regarded by Administration, not simply as an unfortunate necessity, but as something absolutely central to the operation.

Vox: What were the most important consequences of the strike?

Millard: After the strike we had the Council meeting with the vote of non-confidence, and I was astonished at the number of people, and the kinds of people who stood up, and the years of frustration with Administration came out. Solid, conservative people had the same story as I had, even personally and quite apart from the Association, of having worked and worked on a committee and then you discover that the President or somebody else has made a decision without bothering to tell you and which has pre-empted that work.

You saw a new sense in professors of the value of their work, and a determination to take part in the decision-making process. In addition, you saw a sense of solidarity, such as it is. It's not terribly

good, but it's a hell of a lot better than it used to be. You know the stories from the strike, of people on the picket lines with the most unlikely companions, striking up a conversation, and suddenly realizing what Biochemistry was about, and what literature was about. The workshops we had, where people just got together and talked, were one of the most important happenings in this university in the last ten years. There is a sense of community such as



we've never had before. It's still not good enough, mind you. I think we're still territorialized. The University is still poised now for the leadership to either take it forward or take it back. That's a concern, I think, because there's a depressing lack of leadership on campus. There's hope I think in Dean Atkinson in Arts and Science. He's the only administrator in my entire experience at this University who's shown any courage and resoluteness, in looking at situations, seeing what needs to be done, and by God going to do it. He's the only one who isn't subject to this curious Saskatchewan inertia, where change sneaks in the back door, under the mat, if there's change at all. It's very difficult to bring change in the front door, and David Atkinson seems to be doing that.

The economic situation is very bad in this university, but it's not mortal, and the advantage of that is that we're again forced to look at ourselves. What is essential in what we do and what is less essential. Those are important exercises that need to be done. It was very easy to go to sleep in this place but it's been impossible to sleep the last few years.

Vox: One of the ways in which you were political back in the seventies was as a gay rights activist. How much progress in this area has there been at this University in the last fifteen years?

Millard: We've made a vast amount of progress, I'm delighted to say. At one time, homosexuality wasn't mentioned. If it appeared, it was dealt with quietly, by people being asked to resign. In the English Department, for instance, years ago somebody went to the Head and said somebody was homosexual, and that person simply "resigned", and the Department Head considered himself a very civil person for having allowed the man to go off and do the "right thing." It was a subject that wasn't brought into the open, which is a filthy state of affairs. With the Doug Wilson affair, the gay movement hit the campus, and I'm proud to say I had a certain part in that. The issue had to be faced, and remember quite distinctly the reaction people had: they did not want to know about it.

People, even liberal people, would come and say: "Why are you bringing this out into the open? I'm tolerant. If somebody's causing problems well I can have a cup of coffee and explain things to this person." And we said "Thank you very much, those days are over. It's my battle and I'm going to fight it, and what's more, I don't trust you to do it over a cup of coffee." So it was brought out into the open and there were various fights. The Doug Wilson thing was a wonderful exercise in consciousness-raising. It was brilliantly educational. The whole campus was alert to the question. There were arguments going on on all sides. I'm fairly confident that if you have somebody of fairly good will, but who is ignorant of these matters, that if you present them with the information they are inevitably going to come to what I consider to be the right conclusion. If you remain homophobic, it's because of some personal reason, which is irrational, or for some religious reason, which is the same thing. You use religion to support your own irrational psychological need, whatever it is. There is absolutely no logical reason to be homophobic.

So the University has made huge strides. It's still difficult. I'm still the only openly gay professor. There are dozens of us. This may sound conceited, but the fact is that when I go students coming here for the first time will not know about Peter Millard. They did before; some of them knew before they got here. That's very important for a gay student coming here from a background which has been homophobic, where he daren't tell his parents why he thinks that he's a monster. A lot of kids I know from the country say "I thought when I growing up that I was the only one." And then they discover that they're not. And they see somebody who can be a professor, and a Chair of the Association, who's gay and openly gay, and that's very important for them. It's also very important for the straight people. It's now possible to be openly gay on this campus without paying too much for it, I think, if you have tenure. We have clauses in the Collective Agreement, and in the C.U.P.E. contract, anti-discrimination clauses, and that's a good thing.

What was really encouraging for me was when we had a meeting of the Association to bring in the Dental Plan, do you remember that? They adopted the Clinicians' one, and there was an outrageously, quite overtly discriminatory clause there which when it talked about spouses being included in the plan specified spouses of the opposite sex, in other words, queers need not apply. And I thought "Oh god, here we go again."

Vox: And people spoke out against it.

Millard: Yes, I didn't have to do it; Millard didn't have to do it. Somebody else did, even a doctor no less. Doctors had traditionally been by far the worst. They know the least about human sexuality in my experience. That was immensely encouraging, to have the "luxury" of silence for a change.

Vox: You're taking early retirement. Was that a difficult decision?

Millard: Not at all. I've loved it here. I love teaching. It's been a great privilege and a pleasure to Chair the Department. The strike was fun —it was exhausting, but it was fun. But I really do want a

part of my life, when I still have vigour and health, for myself. For the last ten years or so I've been vaguely thinking about a place to retire but it was Leroy Morrissey's death that really was the spur. You remember he was younger than I was when he died, and he apparently said before he died: "you know I've been working all my life to this point, and now there's nothing." And I thought to hell with this, and I worked out a five-year plan, and it worked, miraculously. I want to read, but the luxury of reading what I want to read, instead of what I need to read, can you imagine? And some writing, perhaps some art consulting on the side to supplement my income. I'll try to stay out of politics and human rights. I'm not really a political person, I've been pushed into that. I didn't want to be Chair of the Association. It took about three deputations to do it. I was forced to be political, and anyone who is not is a fool, really, and a scoundrel. One has to be political, one can't just leave it alone. These people say "Oh I'm not interested in politics" and I think that's immoral. You have to be interested in politics, because that's where the power is. It's about the sharing of power, and if you don't become a part of it, then you deserve what you get, or what you don't get.

I feel a great deal of affection for this place, and I have a great deal of respect for the University. That was one of the frustrating things about dealing with Administration. They thought I had some political angle. It took me a while to tumble to this. I realized they thought I'm doing this because I want something, to be Dean of Arts and Science. It never occurred to them that one could care about the University, that one could care about a principle. So you learn, I guess, to be political like them, in order to bring about what you want. I've been blessed, I think, by not being personally ambitious — this is not a boast, or false modesty — it's just a fact, I'm not ambitious, at least not the way some people are. But there are certain things I care about, and the enterprise in which we're engaged, of research and teaching, is a noble one, and deserves the best that we can give it.

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Vox, Room 20
Education Building
University of Saskatchewan
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