

Modern academia revisited

Authors attack thin-skinned myths

Caroline Bird, like most journalists, is a myth breaker, an eager knight searching for bubbles to burst. In *The Case Against College* she aims her lance at American colleges and universities and finds them full to the brim with thin-skinned myths.

"The simple thesis of this book," Bird says, "is that college is good for some people, but it is not good for everybody. The great majority of high school graduates aren't sure what they want to do. They, and their parents, need some realistic help in deciding whether the promotional claims for the product college are what they want to buy."

The Case Against College might also lead college students to re-evaluate their own commitment to higher education. Bird categorically attacks all the traditional beliefs about college:

1) College, she says, is *not* a good financial investment. The odds are that a high school graduate today would do better if he put his college money in the local Savings and Loan and went straight to work.

2) College does not prepare students for careers. Many, if not most students, Bird asserts, end up with jobs totally unrelated to their field of study, and others find that the things learned in college are "less likely to come in handy later than to fade from memory and relevance."

3) There is no correlation between "success" and college. Bird notes that many of the most successful people in our society are high-school and college drop-outs.

4) There is no evidence that a liberal arts education makes a "better" person, or that it teaches values.

5) Colleges and universities, Bird contends finally, do not even provide a very healthy atmosphere for growing up. "College delays maturation instead of acting as a supernutrient of it," one student told Bird.

For the vast majority of students, Bird concludes, college is merely a "youth ghetto" that keeps them out of

the job market and prolongs adolescence.

Bird's points are well made, but little of what she says is new or original. Most of it has been recognized by the more open-minded educators for several years. Bird has simply put it all together

books

by Alan Murray

"The Case Against College" by Caroline Bird, David McKay, \$9.95.
"The Professors" by Herbert Livesey, Charterhouse, \$9.95.

in a form accessible to parents and their children who are considering college. She also provides a listing of a few of the possible alternatives to higher education.

Herbert Livesey is not nearly so eager a knight as Ms. Bird. His book, *The Professors*, is an honest attempt to explore all dimensions of the college professor, and the only bubbles he breaks are the ones that happen to get in his way.

The subtitle of the book (Who they are, What they do, What they really want and What they need) reads like the marquee for "Night-Call Nurses," but Livesey's work is not an expose of the wormy underside of professional life. This underside certainly exists—as Livesey points out, "self-proclaimed atheists, Communists, homosexuals, racial supremacists, and apostles of virtually every form of socio-political deviation abound in the professoriate." But this is only a small aspect of the profession, and Livesey treats it as such. He is equally concerned with Mr. Chips and Dr. Strangelove, as well as the spectrum of academics that lie between the two.

Livesey, for the most part, refrains from generalities, and instead introduces the professoriate by introducing individual professors. He

takes us into their class rooms and into their homes. Through over a dozen personality portraits, Livesey touches on all the major issues of the profession: departmental politics, publish or perish, relevance vs. tradition in teaching, unionization, and teaching evaluation. More importantly, he shows these issues through individual perspective, thus giving them depth and humanity. The individuals he portrays are the achievers of the profession, whereas the average professor is, as he admits, "a singularly undramatic figure." But these standouts represent the tremendous diversity of the profession.

Livesey does not take considerable pains to break one rather large bubble concerning the professoriate. Although many people, including professors themselves, are convinced that an academic career offers little financial reward, Livesey claims that "no other occupational group can match the accumulated compensations, both economic and psychic, of the professoriate." With figures to back him up, Livesey concludes that for the most part, academics lead "The Life of Professor Riley."

Livesey's book is sensitive, insightful and a pleasure to read. Unfortunately, it will probably not sell nearly as well as Bird's less skillfully written and more pointed analysis of college education. Most readers expect journalists to separate the good and the bad, the just and the unjust, and to present Truth in a five point outline. Most journalists, like Bird, attempt to oblige these expectations. Herbert Livesey does not. He presents the professoriate with all its variations and ambiguities.

People desiring to understand the ambivalences in life generally read fiction. Perhaps Livesey should write fiction.



photo by Helen Marcus

Caroline Bird
Truth in a five-point outline

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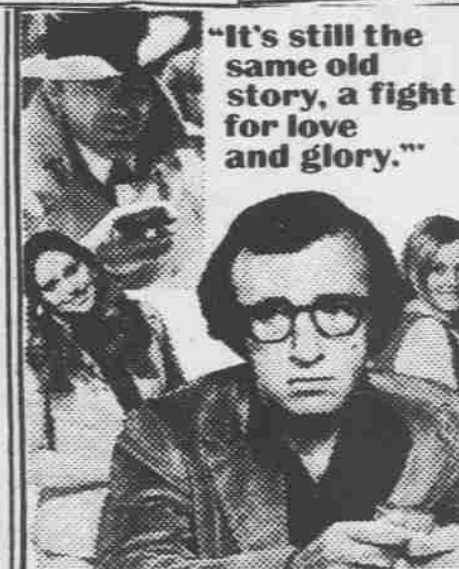
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