

University jubilees: A new research area in the history of universities [\[1\]](#)

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Pieter Dhondt (ed.) 2011. National, Nordic or European? Nineteenth-Century University Jubilees and Nordic Cooperation. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 326 p.

Pieter Dhondt (ed.) 2014. University Jubilees and University History Writing: a Challenging Relationship. Leiden and Boston: Brill. 255 p.

The study of the history of university jubilees is at the nexus of several sub-disciplines and scientific trends. For the sociologist, university celebrations provide valuable material on the links between students, lecturing staff, chairs and faculties, giving insights into the institutional and corporate nature of the university. The preparations for a jubilee (about which we learn from minutes of the meetings of jubilee commissions, correspondence between the rector, lecturing staff and government officials, reminiscences, etc.) show the relationship between the university and the world outside, most notably the state and the city, whose assistance the university often has to seek in order to organize the festival because of a shortage of its own resources.

Yet the most relevant question for scholars today is the role of the jubilee in shaping the identity of the scientific community. This is the subject of two recent collective volumes edited by Pieter Dhondt, senior lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland. Although the two books have been published at an interval of four years, they deal with similar issues such as the strategies of representing universities, among other topics. Therefore it is warranted to consider them a joint project. Both are collections of lectures delivered at workshops in which historians from various European countries took part.

National, Nordic or European? Nineteenth-Century University Jubilees and Nordic Cooperation clarifies how the identity of Scandinavian universities was formed in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The search of a scientific community for its own identity can be seen as a choice from among several alternatives, a choice which is dictated by the need not only to cement the professional community, but also to gain authority and financial benefits. The situation becomes even more complicated when we learn that, in organising anniversaries, the scientists of a corporation are no independent actors. Each university jubilee is, after all, a public event. It is prepared and conducted while taking into account the political situation in the country, and with direct involvement of the state.

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the flourishing of pan-nationalist movements: Pan-Slavism, Pan-Germanism, Pan-Hellenism and so on. At that time, the Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland) also proposed their own ethnic and cultural unification projects, which local universities could not afford to ignore. For them, a jubilee was not simply a festive event or an occasion to remember their past, but also a way to express loyalty to the state, either by choosing one of the three ideological trends – nationalism, Scandinavism or Europeanism – or by trying to find a balance between the three (a notable example is the bicentenary of Helsinki University in 1840, where

the organizers successfully realized a balance between Finnish nationalism and loyalty to the Russian Empire). The historian's task in such cases is to study sources of a different origin thoroughly in order to identify the leitmotif of the jubilee as it was perceived by participants and observers, which is by no means obvious to us after the passage of many years. One must hand it to the authors: they accomplish their task with flying colours.

Of particular interest to Scandinavian scholars are the chapters by Ejvind Slottved "The Quartercentenary of the University of Copenhagen in 1879. Denmark between Europe and the Nordic Countries", and Robert D. Anderson "University Centenary Ceremonies in Scotland 1884–1911". The former shows how the 400th anniversary of the University of Copenhagen, which was initially planned as a major international event, turned into a local event after Denmark was defeated in the Danish-Prussian war of 1864 and, more particularly, after the revision of the Treaty of Prague in 1879, with the result that Austria relinquished its rights to Schleswig and Holstein in favour of Prussia. In reaction, out of the fear for anti-German protests, Copenhagen University opted for a low-key celebration as a pretext for strengthening relations not with European, but specifically with Scandinavian universities.

The study by Robert D. Anderson does not entirely fit into the thematic framework of the collection. Unlike the other articles, it is not devoted to jubilees in Scandinavia, but to those of Scottish universities between 1884 and 1911. Yet it can be seen as material for a comparative analysis. Anderson shows that, in celebrating their anniversaries, Scottish universities at the time also had to face the choice between a national or an international message. Anderson studies the dilemma on the basis of two types of sources: the lists of invited guests and the jubilee speeches.

Although words like 'identity' and 'ideology' do crop up in the book, none of them are used as working concepts on the basis of which the mechanisms for analysing events could be prescribed. This may have been a conscious decision by the authors to avoid overloading the text with ponderous theoretical constructs, which would take a lot of space and time to explain. In result, the book is essentially a list of cases brought together by common spatial borders and a common concept according to which universities use their anniversaries to work out a set of consolidating images to promote internal unity. This is, in principle, a viable approach, especially considering that most of the cases have so far only received a cursory examination (historians have only turned their attention to university jubilees in the second half of the twentieth century). Even so, one has to admit that the study is short on conceptualisation, an area in which social sciences could be helpful.

The problem of various types of identity and methods for constructing them is treated in the works of Erik H. Erikson (1968) and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), which meanwhile have become classics of social psychology. Considering a university a social phenomenon, one can see that, like any other group, it contains several closely intertwined identities. Historical constructivism (invention of traditions and the birth of imagined communities) can be equally productive. Its founders – Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), and Benedict Anderson (1983) – have shown the tremendous role of traditions and symbols in forming modern European nation-states. Incidentally, in their analyses of university jubilees, German, Italian and Russian scholars have drawn inspiration from Hobsbawm (Paletschek 2001, 39, Vom Brocke 2004, 52, Sani 2012, 485-487, Dmitriev 2013, 41-42, Vishlenkova & Dmitriev 2013, 62), most probably because his concept of invented traditions is well-known to historians and does not require deep knowledge of philosophy, psychology or social sciences.

Elaborating a serious professional approach on the basis of theories from other discipli-

nes and testing this on concrete material is today a challenge not only for those who study jubilees, but also for historians of higher education in general. The topic of why modern historiography of universities is highly in need of professionalisation is touched upon in the second collection of articles, *University Jubilees and University History Writing: A Challenging Relationship*, which discusses the impact of jubilees on how the history of institutions of higher education has been written.


Like the former book, it presents several case studies, this time from universities of continental Europe, above all in Germany, France and what is now the Czech Republic. Although the actual subject of the book, as explained by the editor, is the writing of jubilee (hi)stories by the universities themselves, the authors cannot sidestep the problem of identity, because it is through these historical narratives, which are produced on the occasion of the jubilee – by the way often one of the most expensive parts of the preparatory events –, that an academic corporation asserts certain interpretations of its past as the dominant ones.

The book opens with an introductory article by Dhondt, which gives a general outline of the historical interconnection between the writing of university histories and jubilees. This close relationship partly explains the lag of modern history of higher education compared to other subdisciplines. The need for such texts is long overdue because they make it possible to sum up previous analytical experience gleaned from individual case studies, to formulate interim conclusions and to identify areas of future study. Russia, for example, does not have such reviews, though it has to be said, for fairness sake, that university anniversaries only began to attract the attention of Russian historians a few years ago.

Dhondt notes that more and more historians in Europe argue that university historiography should emancipate itself from the influence of jubilees and strike out on its own, equipped with modern instruments. As Johan Östling shows in his article, this trend is already making itself felt in Germany, where intensive discussions of the sources and origins of the German university model have led to a re-interpretation of the role of Berlin University in shaping European higher education in the nineteenth century, bringing scholars to talk about the phenomenon of the ‘Humboldt Myth’. In addition to Östling’s article, historians of education are likely to be interested particularly in two other texts of the volume. One of them is devoted to the prosopographical method of analysing the French academic milieu (by Emmanuelle Picard) and the other to the integration of university history writing into the broader context of history of education (by Dhondt). All three studies, deliberately put in the third and final part of the collection, provide good examples of the opportunities opening up for studying the history of universities, unencumbered by the culture of festivals.

The fact that jubilees are ceasing to be a condition for writing university histories and are themselves becoming the subject of scientific inquiry is heartening. Yet, when university history aims to attain the level of other scientific trends, specialists will have to come up not only with new methodologies and approaches, but also with a functional conceptual apparatus that would render the idiom of university studies more professional. Consequently, the publication of a book on the writing of university histories could be a fitting occasion to discuss what the term ‘history writing’ means when applied to institutions of higher education: what forms of and scenarios for representing the past it covers; whether it should include, along with scientific texts (monographs, articles, collective volumes, etc.), texts in the genre of public history; how to distinguish public and scientific studies of modern and earlier times; whether history writing should include other, for example, visual means of representing the past. Let us hope that these and other questions will be discussed at future conferences and workshops and that interesting new publications will emerge

from them.

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