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Renate Simpson. *The Development of the PhD Degree in Britain, 1917-1959 and Since: An Evolutionary and Statistical History in Higher Education.* Foreword by Harold Silver. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009. xxxiv + 707 pp. $159.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7734-4827-8.

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For many PhD students today, the thought of completing their degree in only three years seems absurd. Between 1917 and 1959, however, the median time taken for PhD students in Britain was three years. This is only one of many statistics brought to light in Renate Simpson's 2009 book, *The Development of the PhD Degree in Britain, 1917-1959 and Since.* In it, Simpson disseminates twenty years of research that emphasizes the variety among programs and students and shows that despite all of the developments in the PhD over the period covered in the book, it is not so different from the typical PhD program today.

Rather than responding to other scholars' work, this book expands upon Simpson's earlier research. The book is a sequel to her 1983 book *How the PhD Came to Britain: A Century of Struggle for Postgraduate Education*, which focused on the years 1917-20. This new work highlights the years 1917-59, about which the least is known. She begins in 1917, the year of the creation of the PhD in Britain, and ends right before the "Robbins Report" on higher education (1963), which set a turning point because the chair, Lord Robbins, compiled data on universities. Simpson refers to this report frequently and calls for others to build upon her work, researching the post-"Robbins Report" years of PhD degree history in Britain. In addition, although she focuses on the PhD in Britain, she also refers to programs elsewhere, particularly in Germany and the United States. The author's frequent comparison of the PhD in Britain to that in the United States, whose own PhD was still young though more established than that of Britain, provides readers with greater social and historical context. Additional research could not only expand the chronological but also the geographical scope.

In terms of her approach, Simpson's work is an addition to statistical history, but Harold Silver's foreword argues that it is much more than that. It is also "careful, meticulous detective work which addresses issues and implications" (p. xxiii). Indeed, the most impressive aspect of *The Development of the PhD Degree in Britain* is the years of investigative labor required to create such a notable volume. The book does not set out with a clear argument but instead responds to the complete lack of official statistics about English and Scottish universities, both nationally and within most institutions, regarding numbers and types of PhD students. Simpson was inspired to create this piece after the Economic and Social Research Council requested, in 1987, that she provide a historical contribution to their report on submission rates for PhD programs in the social sciences.[1] This book takes the concept of the report, known as the Winfield Report, and shares data, including completion rates, age, gender, home or overseas origin, prior educational experience, subject area of study, and supervisory and examination rates over a period of four decades. Particularly remarkable is that Simpson is careful to include part-time and staff students, women, returning or non-traditional students, and international students so as not to assume all students were of one variety. To compile this data, Simpson used student record cards, files, and registers, carefully maintaining student anonymity in the work. In addition, she relied on university conference proceedings, committee and senate reports, and research by Ernest Rudd, Lionel Robbins, and the University Grants Committee, which oversaw funding among universities in the United Kingdom during the period covered.

Simpson did not set out to compile data that included all PhD programs and students within her time period, but her sample is nevertheless impressive. The study includes data from seven institutions: the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Manchester, the London School of Economics, Imperial College, and University College London. Her sample of 9,600 includes approximately half of all PhD students enrolled in British universities

from 1917-59 and demonstrates the variety of schools and specializations in the seven institutions. Readers get the sense that certain trends regarding student age, areas of study, and PhD requirements permeated the nation, while they also sense the variety within; Simpson presents a nuanced rather than a monolithic analysis of the PhD program. Throughout the book, she continuously compares and contrasts the seven institutions. For instance, she notes that Cambridge and Oxford did not permit part-time study whereas one-fifth of students at Edinburgh and the London School of Economics attended part time. Additionally, Oxford stood out as more hesitant to support PhD work, particularly in English, whereas Edinburgh gained a reputation for admitting a large number of U.S. students. Simpson divided the students into so many different categories, based on age, country of origin, gender, and more that the reader is left to believe that all factors have been thoroughly considered. By presenting overall statistics, too, Simpson allows readers to notice general trends rather than getting lost in the divisions and intersections of her data. For instance, readers understand that approximately three-quarters of PhD students who enrolled ended up completing their programs. We know, further, that this trend changed slightly based on students' age and gender. Overall, the management of this vast amount of data is remarkable.

The book is divided into two parts with several chapters in each. Part 1, "Evolution of the PhD in Britain," is a historical overview of the creation of PhD programs, courses of study in these programs, and expectations of students. Part 2, "The British PhD in Numbers," investigates specific characteristics of PhD students, including gender, age, area of study, completion rates, and country of origin. The two sections of the book complement each other, demonstrating not only the requirements for completion of a PhD but also the types of students in PhD programs. With frequent headings and logical progression of topics, the book's organization presents a thorough and easy-to-follow discussion of the subject matter. Additionally, Simpson's prose is concise and readable though repetitive at times. Despite the technical nature of the research, Simpson utilizes a conversational tone at times, sharing her own experiences as a student, which reminds readers that the work is about people–not merely numbers.

Rather than focusing on the chronological history of the PhD program, part 1 identifies specific aspects of PhD work and how these aspects came about and were solidified in the seven institutions under review. Simpson provides an overview of the creation of the degree, requirements for admission, and what the typical course of study entailed. Additionally, she discusses debates over the management of a thesis, inclusion of examinations, and the results of PhD study. Throughout this portion of the text, readers gain a greater sense of how PhD programs today do not differ dramatically from those of earlier years. For instance, Simpson points out professors' frustrations with underprepared students; the difficulty in balancing the demands of supervising PhD students while maintaining one's own research and teaching; debates over the balance of course work and individual research; foreign-language requirements; and the push to encourage students to finish within a reasonable amount of time while not hindering thorough qualification for bestowal of the degree. Throughout these discussions, Simpson shows that PhD requirements were not only not uniform but were also hotly debated among and within institutions. Part 1 is thus a story about the nature of the PhD itself, situated in a historical context.

Simpson reminds readers that this work is about individual students, too, and not simply about programs of study. For instance, while the number of copies of the thesis a student was required to submit and the required length of the thesis may seem trivial matters, Simpson argues that "they certainly mattered to the candidate" (p. 115). In that spirit, part 2 analyzes the make-up of students and their PhD experiences. Simpson states, "The aim here is to provide as full a profile as possible of the PhD student population in Britain during the first 40 years or so of its existence" (p. 215). Through her data, Simpson profiles the most common PhD student: British, male, aged nineteen to twenty-three years, studying chemistry, and completing the PhD in less than three years. Certainly, this is a simplification of Simpson's data, but readers are enabled to draw conclusions based on the numbers that Simpson makes available. She describes both typical and atypical students in the arts, sciences, and social sciences, part-time students, female students, overseas students, and others. By placing her data within historical context, she concludes that elements such as war and family responsibilities likely influenced when, where, and how students enrolled in PhD programs. For example, she gives reasons why more PhD students studied science rather than the arts, noting the greater access to funding in science, a fact reminiscent of today's realities. Simpson thereby illustrates typical students while reminding readers of the variations within the student population.

Perhaps the most helpful contribution of this book is its analysis of completion rates in PhD programs. Most of the data Simpson encountered pertained to those who

completed PhD degrees but did not consider those who began a program but eventually dropped out. Simpson's work filled this gap in knowledge by comparing enrollment and completion data at the seven institutions and analyzing results based on faculty, department, age, gender, previous degrees, and country of origin. Certainly, such findings can help institutions today determine how to encourage greater success and higher completion rates among students by addressing the concerns of the past. For instance, Simpson notes the predilection of women toward the arts; their decisions to not enroll in PhD programs, at least as young adults; and their tendency to begin PhD programs at a later age and experience greater difficulty than men in completing programs at these later ages. Administrators and faculty in contemporary post-secondary institutions may now look at these statistics to provide greater support to female students struggling to manage school and family responsibilities and to target adolescent females, encouraging graduate education.

A drawback to Simpson's book is that it ends abruptly. Rather than simply concluding nearly every chapter, and the book itself, with data, it would have been helpful to have brief conclusions at the end of each chapter and, indeed, a conclusion for the book itself. These additions would also have helped develop an argument, showing the data's significance. The reader is left with summaries of data but not a thorough analysis of it. Conclusions would have reviewed findings and noted both historical and current significance of the statistics. Additionally, apart from a couple of brief anecdotes, including one about Nobel laureate Peter Kapitza, the author focuses on statistical summary and analysis rather than social experience. The book allows the statistics to speak for themselves, but it would have been helpful for Simpson to provide further analysis and to draw conclusions from the data.

The book includes over two hundred tables and figures, mostly in part 2. Lists of tables and figures, a bibliography, and an index all aid readers in using this work as a source for further research. Simpson herself calls for additional investigation of the topic, noting her chronological constraints that have left the past fifty years unexplored. A task of this size is daunting, though Simpson's work shows that it is possible. By providing statistics on the PhD program in Britain, in addition to outlining the program's development, Simpson emphasizes the importance of graduate programs within the history of education and the place of Britain's PhD program in the development of graduate studies worldwide. Additionally, her book reminds scholars that educational statistics are about a diverse group of students, who may not be so different from PhD students today.

Note

[1]. Graham Winfield and the Economic and Social Research Council (Great Britain), "The Social Science PhD: The ESRC Inquiry on Submission Rates: A Report" (Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council, 1987).

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