

Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture

Michael Moffatt

New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989. 345 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), \$12.95 (paper)

Reviewer: Norm Sheffe
St. Catherines, Ontario.

Though noting that "in cultural anthropology, your professional prestige depends on how distant, exotic, and uncomfortable your research site is" (p.1), Professor Moffatt opts for a familiar, comfortable site where he can practise his art, Rutgers College, or more specifically, the undergraduate dorms and classes of the State University of New Jersey.

Using the techniques of the cultural anthropologist, he examines patterns which are, on the one hand, unique in time and place and, on the other, applicable to many undergraduate populations in North American colleges. Working from the mid-1970s through 1987, Moffatt supplemented participant observation in college dormitories with questionnaires, audio-taped conversations, and autobiographical papers from his Cultural Anthropology classes. In a reflective mood, Moffatt observes:

My overall feeling is that educationally Rutgers is not doing all that badly by its undergraduates. This judgement is only possible, however, if one cuts away much of the customary rhetoric about higher education and looks at the actual social structure of American public universities in the late twentieth century — and at the larger American culture (and economy, and polity) in which colleges and universities are embedded — more realistically. (p. 310)

The basic point of *Coming of Age* is that the culture of Rutgers undergraduates originates in American mass-consumer culture. One is led to ask some questions: have the critics of post-secondary education carefully considered the impact of a whole cultural ambience on their institutions, rather than the usual litany of impoverished school systems, poorly prepared teachers, televisions or anti-intellectual home environments? The undergraduate, imprisoned in the adolescent mass culture, may be evolving towards something ethically higher. Despite the popularity of degrees in Business Administration (economics being the overwhelming first choice for a major at Rutgers) which witnesses rampant vocationalism in higher education, the burgeoning interest in business ethics on campus may be a welcome sign. But Moffatt, the social scientist, reports. He does not editorialize.

The focal point of the study — coming of age — is stressed by the inclusion of two chapters out of seven devoted to sex in college. The subject is somewhat fudged, since it is apparent that in many ways, many, perhaps most of these *children* came of age before they matriculated. However, Moffatt provides the reader with careful definitions, descriptions and discussion of social relationships. The categories friend, friendly, close friendships, and intimate and non-intimate closeness are scrutinized and discussed at some length.

If you are a good, normal American human being in the 1980s, you should be ready, under certain unstated circumstances, to extend friendship to any other human being regardless of the artificial distinctions that divide people in the real world. To be otherwise is to be something other than a properly egalitarian American; it is to be “snobbish”; it is to “think you are better than other people”. . . . They know that the correct response to a friendly How are you? is Fine or Not Bad; only with a true friend do you sit down and talk for half an hour about how you are actually feeling at the moment. (p. 43)

Moffatt’s remarks remind one that the emphasis on *friendliness* in American life has been remarked on by visitors almost from the earliest days of the new nation. The intrusion into daily speech of remarks designed to demonstrate the amiability of human contact is one more example of speech patterns imposed on social intercourse by strategists of hucksterish, market-wise purveyors of the happy face school of *friendliness* — Have a good day.

The occupants of the freshman dorms at Rutgers are usually initiated into the rituals of these social ploys back in high school, and proceed to refine them, not without some soul-searching. Dilemma: do I smile and/or say “Hi” to a face seen occasionally in my Psych I class of 600? Do I nod, and walk on? Should I use a formula phrase? “Nice day, isn’t it?” or will this seem too friendly? Context solves some of these difficulties: people on your dorm floor deserve a ritual greeting, roommates something more, and close friends much more. Sex partners . . . well that can be worked out.

Moffatt has written *Coming of Age in New Jersey* in a popular, readable style. He has omitted the full panoply of scholarly citations, annotated bibliography, stylistic pretentiousness and the disfiguring rash of social science jargon. It is fair, therefore, to infer that he and his publisher have aimed for the general market of intelligent non-fiction readers. He has included end of chapter notes, titled “Further Comment” which are useful and attempt to make up for the occasional truncated discussion of promising issues. Given the general focus of the book, there are several points that could have been illumined for the hoped-for readership. One in particular that would have been useful is an organized discussion of the class structure at Rutgers. There are scattered comments here and there in several of the chapters, and, indeed, the chapter on Race covers part of the ground, though it is concerned with a particular example of socialization and *friendly* relations.

Moffatt’s handling of the historical background of adolescent college culture is more successful. Recent developments which some consider to have reached crisis proportions are put in perspective. This is exemplified in his discussion of the shift from an *in loco parentis* status for college authorities to peer control over sexual behaviour. In the chapter on Race he points to the rather wry decision to name the dorm floor where Blacks were to be accommodated as Robeson, “named for the most illustrious alumnus in the history of the college, black or white,” quite literally domesticating the legacy of one of the century’s leading rebels who became an exile from his own country. The details of Robeson’s career are contained in a footnote. A passing reference to the changing centre of gravity for the role of professor from teacher to researcher, and the consequences for education, may enlarge the understanding of the intelligent public with regard to the vexing question, “Why can’t Johnny read the newspaper intelligently?”

The study provides a wide range of cultural elements, artifacts and activities

for discussion. Of significance is the frequently ignored truism that students are “becoming” adults. The first word in Moffatt’s title is essentially a “present imperfect,” and reminds us of the process of development at the heart of the college experience. The dejected comments of one student reflecting on the beginnings of that coming-of-age are both pointed and poignant: “I found myself intimidated when I began at Rutgers because all the students I was meeting seemed very intellectual . . . I found myself with intelligent thoughts behind a very weak vocabulary” (p. 299).

It would be unfortunate if *Coming of Age in New Jersey* fails to reach its projected readership. It offers a fascinating glimpse into student life. Moffatt’s insights into contemporary culture are always apt. For example, consider his comments on the freshman understanding of the concept of culture as described in the chapter on Race, where he tells us that students’

working concept of culture is not especially deep or sophisticated. Notably missing from it was the idea that culture could fundamentally determine modes of thought and deeply influence behaviour, or that it was relativistic in any sense more profound than one person’s having a taste for one leisure activity and another for a different activity.

Anthropologist: What different types of people have you noticed here at Rutgers so far?

Freshman Female (Sept. 1978): Well, I’ve noticed a lot of people here are into Frisbee. Is that what you mean? (p. 153).

A Victorian Missionary and Canadian Indian Policy: Cultural Synthesis vs Cultural Replacement

David A. Nock

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, for the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion/Corporation Canadienne des Sciences Religieuses, 1988. x + 194 pp. \$14.95 (paper)

Reviewer: Elizabeth Graham
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This book examines three phases of E.F. Wilson’s lifework — as missionary, school principal and amateur anthropologist — with detailed descriptions of the background influences upon him in each.

In 1868 E.F. Wilson arrived at the Sarnia Reserve on behalf of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). Nock explores the aspects of Wilson’s personality and strong family association with the Evangelical Movement in the Church of England that led him to take this step. In Sarnia, Wilson intended to follow the policies of Henry Venn, of the CMS, who strongly advocated cultural synthesis (i.e., a people’s borrowing selected items from a dominant culture and merging them with its own). He was to organize a Native Church which would then be run by the Natives themselves. But he found himself in a community with a well established Methodist Church, and nothing worked quite the way it was supposed to. Nock assesses Wilson’s work at Sarnia as a failure and takes Wilson to task for not implementing Venn’s plans, for fighting with the Methodists and for ignoring Native government.

After two years Wilson moved to Garden River and, in 1871, based on schemes of cultural replacement (i.e., strategies in which the dominant culture