

Book Review

John Meisel.

A Life of Learning and Other Pleasures: John Meisel's Tale.

South Frontenac, ON: Wintergreen Studios Press, 2012.

Reviewed by James Iain Gow, Université de Montréal, Canada.

If John Meisel were living in Japan, he would be designated as a “Living National Treasure”, in recognition of his high mastery of his craft and in the hope of aiding in its transmission to future generations. In this review, I will recall briefly why he deserves such recognition, evaluate these memoirs and draw lessons for the readers of *TIJ* concerning some of the conditions that lead to innovation.

It is fashionable these days to declare any acquaintance or shared interest with a person whose work one is reviewing. When the editor asked me to do this, I replied that I would gladly do it if she would accept that it came from someone biased in favour of John Meisel. She replied “Who isn't?” so here I am and you are warned. Meisel was my professor at Queen's, my M.A. thesis supervisor and advisor and helper when I did my doctorate at Laval University, he recommended me for two jobs, and has been a mentor for about fifty years. Still, as my colleague André Blais used to tell graduate students, being critical does not only mean finding fault, it also means being able to say why you like a text or an argument, so I will try to adhere to this sense of critical.

In brief, Meisel has had a career of sixty years as a professor of political science at Queen's University. He was born in Vienna of Czechoslovak parents, but the years of his primary schooling were spent in the Czech town of Zlin, where the Bat'a shoe company dominated economic and cultural life. In the face of the growing threat from Nazi Germany, the Bat'a company assigned his father successively to Holland, Casablanca and Haiti, before coming to Canada where he continued to work for the firm. Throw in secondary school education at a residential school in England, and you have a cosmopolitan and polyglot young man who went to Pickering College before attending University of Toronto in the Department of Political Economy under the direction of Harold Innis.

In his political science career, Meisel had many fields of research and teaching, but three stand out. He did the first national election study, on the election of 1957. In 1965, he launched and led the first survey-based national election study. Parties and elections were one of his first fields of specialization. Second, starting with an M.A. thesis on T.G. Masaryk and Czech nationalism, Meisel became interested in political culture and nationalism, particularly French-English relations in Canada. Third, he explored cultural policy and broadcasting, which led to his most important non-academic contribution. Never content to stay in the ivory tower, he not only headed up his department at Queen's, but he presided over the Canadian Political Science Association,

the Royal Society of Canada, was a research supervisor for the Laurendeau-Dunton Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and Chairman of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC) in the early 1980s. He was the founding co-editor of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and founding editor of *The International Political Science Review*, which he later co-edited with Jean Laponce. He and Laponce were such pillars of the IPSA that they were known as its “godfathers”, and now have an annual prize named after them for the best article in the *IPSR*. The list of honours he has received is staggering.

In these memoirs, Meisel mercifully does not attempt a straightforward chronological account. He does tell us about the questions and issues that he studied and wrote about, but he tells it all as he lived it, with plenty of detail about the people he met and accompanied along the way and an anthropologist’s eye for telling cultural details concerning people and places. He says near the end (361) that “in the last 88 years, I managed to keep a diary on only three days!” However, he did keep his annual pocket diaries or agendas since 1940 and all his passports since 1933. Reminds one of the nurse in the Beatles’ “Penny Lane”, “And though she feels as if she's in a play, She is anyway”. So it is the theatre of John Meisel’s life that we are invited to. How good is it?

As the luminaries cited on the back cover say, these are charming and fascinating memoirs. The style is at once erudite and familiar. We pass easily from Northrop Fry and Pirandello to Alfred Hitchcock and Harry Potter, and from a few bits of academic jargon to popular expressions. The style is familiar and conversational with many witty asides to the reader and even (which was a first for me) self-criticism about his work and even these memoirs!

Meisel wisely voids false modesty. But is he an elitist and a name dropper? Well, he could hardly tell his story without the names! As a young professor being on a radio panel with Hannah Arendt, Michael Polanyi and Irving Howe; in the 1970s taking part in a committee of the Trilateral Commission in the presence of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Samuel Huntington, Arthur Schlesinger, Michel Crozier and Seymour Martin Lipset; spending a year at Yale in the company of Robert Lane, James Fesler, David Apter, Charles Lindblom and Joseph Lapalombra; in the 1990s as President of the Royal Society, organizing a programme of exchanges with Chinese professors to further the wish of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to study Canada as an exemplar of democratic government; and being invited by the United Nations to chair two conferences of intellectuals from the former Yugoslavia in order to better understand relations between Serbs and Croats. And so on.

So, yes, we meet some pretty exalted company in these pages. However, as the unknown American athlete put it, “It ain’t bragging if yuh done it!” Moreover, Meisel’s conviviality and his capacity for friendship inform all that he has done. He praises “the classlessness of professors” (326) and notes with regret that a number of intellectual celebrities involved with the Trilateral Commission had started on the left but then “had gradually moved to the right, until they flirted with conservatism and even reaction” (339). He views the academic life as a calling, opposing the unionization of professors

(229) and regretting the removal of students' names from their examination papers because it prevented the professor from placing the exam in "the context of all I knew about the student and his or her work." (228) There is a whiff of Helen Mirren's monarch in the remark about Queen's principals: "I am now on my tenth!" (176).

The chapter on Meisel's years as Chairman of the CRTC is full of interesting insights on dealing with the federal bureaucracy. He adopted many small tactics in aid of not being absorbed by it: for instance, he continued to dress like a professor and took care to communicate formally with the minister only, so the deputy minister would be reminded that the commission was not subordinate to him. These pages are on the whole optimistic about a regulatory body such as this being able to work as intended. Meisel particularly praises public hearings as the best way to get at all sides of a major policy issue. He leaves us with a sober outsider's view of the bureaucracy: "the public service constitutes such a critical mass in the Ottawa cocoon and thus a distinct society with its own folkways, I have nowhere sensed a similar and so distinctive a subculture" (321-2).

What are the lessons of these memoirs for those interested in innovation? Obviously, the cosmopolitan nature of the life and the person come first. The frequent dislocations, the hardships of his early years and his understanding of several languages began the process. Then there was the personality. Meisel never drew up a long term plan for his career but exhibited early "a tendency to plan less and to respond more to rising situations" (105). An optimist, he could look back on his life-threatening bout of osteomyelitis as having been a blessing as "it turned me into a reader" (67). Another side to this personality was that work was his obsession and not any one subject. He was active in ten academic or policy oriented associations (280), and he had a strong taste for travel to exotic destinations, which his professional life could both gratify and profit from. So, in the person, an availability, an openness to the novel, predisposes one to innovate. As Hamlet said, "the readiness is all."

Meisel's gift for friendship was put to use when he wished to delve into a new subject: he would probe his friends working in the new area to orient himself in the new territory. He inherited the Bat's tradition of personal discipline and hard work and was blessed with plenty of personal stamina. From his chief at Queen's, J.A. Corry, he picked up an affliction that Ted Hodgetts named ITSNO, the inability to say no. It did, however, feed his desire to travel to distant and exotic places. At the same time, he and his Murie had a rich cultural life: we note that during their two year-long stays in London they systematically explored the visual, musical, theatre and film arts available. Another prominent side of this tale is that Meisel was willing to get his boots dirty in the world of practice, not just in the broadcasting field, but in Canadian national debates and in French-English relations in particular.

So we have here the memoirs of a most interesting man, who lives the life of a public intellectual, drawing on his *joie de vivre*, his capacity for friendship, his boundless curiosity to (as Tennyson put it), "follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bound of human thought". There are some indications that there is more to come, some subjects that he has not had time and space to explore. Let us hope so.

About the Author:

James Iain Gow is emeritus professor of political science at l'Université de Montréal. After five years as a Foreign Service Officer (1957-1962), he took a doctorate in political science at l'Université Laval, before joining the Department of Political Science at l'Université de Montréal. His main research interests are administrative history, the Quebec public service, administrative innovation, culture and ethics, and politics and administration. His principal publications are : *Histoire de l'administration publique québécoise, 1867-1970*; *Learning From Others: Diffusion of Administrative Innovations in Canada*; *From Bureaucracy to Public Management: the Administrative Culture of the Government of Canada* (with O.P. Dwivedi); and *A Canadian Model of Public Administration?*