CHAPTER 1

Introduction

University History Writing: More than a History of Jubilees?

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Researching and writing its own history has always been one of the tasks of the university. From the sixteenth century, rectors and ordinary professors have delivered speeches on the occasion of anniversary celebrations in which they presented their institution’s glorious past. During the nineteenth century, the tradition of jubilee history reached its first peak. The historic speeches made on anniversary celebrations were gradually replaced by a thick and impressive series of commemorative volumes and *Libri Memorialis*, mostly written by history professors or sometimes by a special committee appointed by the rector. Of course, this kind of research concentrated on only one university, with little or no attention paid to other universities in the same country and even less so to those in other countries. In general, such homage offered a celebratory institutional history in which less savoury episodes were often disregarded. The tradition of jubilee history almost completely dominated university history until the Second World War and remained fairly popular even afterwards. However, in a series of two exploratory workshops funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOS-HS), it was precisely these university jubilees which gave the initial impetus to an uncommon comparative approach.

The common title of both of these workshops was “University jubilees in Northern Europe: more than occasions to commemorate their own glorious past?” The first of them (in Helsinki, 12 and 13 March 2009) focussed on nineteenth-century university jubilees as the driving force for the development of Scandinavianist ideas and for increasing cultural and scientific cooperation between the Nordic countries. The workshop and the book1 together was the realisation of the aim to encourage renewed cooperation between historians at different Northern European institutions. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, university jubilees still have the potential to bring the Nordic universities more closely together.

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The aim of the second, historiographic workshop (in Copenhagen, 14 and 15 January 2010) was to study the challenges that face ongoing university history projects (many of them on the occasion of university jubilees), viz. to commemorate “their own glorious past” in a critical way, but without losing sight of relationships with other institutions at home and abroad. For several reasons, the publication of the results of this workshop was delayed and gradually this book developed a broader content, also by including some presentations from another international conference, in Ghent (16 and 17 March 2011) on the topic “Academic culture of remembrance: The combination of university history, jubilees and academic heritage”. One of the main ambitions of this conference was to examine, from a historiographical perspective, the relationship between university history, the culture of remembrance in general, and university jubilees in particular. In consequence of this somewhat different approach, the original focus on Northern Europe has been forsaken.

However, the starting point in all the chapters in this book remains the traditionally close relationship between university history writing and university jubilees, as well as offering in the third part of the book some attempts to go beyond this customary practice. The relationship itself has seen many changes. When, from the end of the nineteenth century, the universities gradually developed into scientific research institutions, their culture of remembrance changed once again and in consequence, the related publications also took on another character. On the occasion of commemorations, books were edited with an emphasis on the (results of) scientific research from the past twenty-five, fifty or hundred years. Although these books were often rather dry and technical, simply listing the facts, this special kind of publication dealing with the history of the university had a specific aim: to illustrate the scientific output and to legitimise the indigenous institution in times of university expansion.

Frequently, by looking into its own history, the university as an institution led by traditions has tried to provide itself with “expertise concerning its future organization in a period of change”\textsuperscript{2}. By writing the history of its own institution, the university attempted to legitimise itself and to offer an answer to a certain crisis\textsuperscript{3}. German university history writing, for instance, experienced a

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