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## It Wasn't My Cancellation That Bothered Me. It Was the Cowardice of Those Who Let It Happen

written by **Margaret Went**e



It doesn't take much to get cancelled these days. Last month, my turn came around. The experience was unpleasant, but also completely ludicrous. And I learned a lot. I learned how

easily an institution will cave to a mob. I learned how quickly the authorities will run for cover, notwithstanding the lip service they may pay to principles of free speech.

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After all, they're terrified. They're afraid that if they don't beg forgiveness and promise to do better, they'll be next at the guillotine.



I was cancelled by one of Canada's quainter institutions, a University of Toronto graduate residential school called Massey College. Few people outside Canadian academia have heard of it. But the cultural revolution has entered its mass-spectacle Reign of Terror phase, and so my story made news across Canada. I was depicted as a racist, anti-feminist heretic whose mere presence inside Massey's halls would have presented a threat to students.

But Massey College hasn't fared too well, either: In this climate, every fusty institution is just one trivial scandal away from public-relations crisis and knives-out infighting, as all concerned flail about in a bid to prove their moral purity. I'll survive. I'm not sure Massey will.

\* \* \*

Massey College was created in the early 1960s by Torontonians eager to evoke the genteel old Oxbridge days. And it remains a charming place, though a bit precious. It is made up of Senior Fellows (distinguished professors from the university, as well as luminaries from the city's intellectual elite) and Junior Fellows (graduate students), who don their gowns to dine together, and perhaps mingle over a glass of port. The Senior Fellows are overwhelmingly white; the Junior Fellows increasingly multicultural. Until recently, the head of the college held the anachronistic title of Master, after the British style. Yet despite these antiquated trappings, Massey College prides itself on being a vibrant forum for high-minded debate and liberal ideals.



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After the party the real work begins: rest today to built tomorrow! All the Best for 2019 from Massey College!

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9:02 AM · Jan 1, 2019



4





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The college has an appendage called the Quadrangle Society, which is basically a jumped-up book club. Its members, of whom there are hundreds, are drawn from the non-academic world. Although membership is by invitation only, it is not terribly exclusive, and nobody is quite sure of its purpose. It is a WASPish take on what once might have been called a “salon”—back in the days when words like that could be used unironically without provoking eye rolls.

Last winter, I was asked to join. I said yes because I have several friends who belong to the Quadrangle Society, and I thought this would be a fun excuse for us to have lunch together in Massey's great hall. Two Quadranglers wrote too-kind nomination letters for me. I was assured that the approval process was a mere formality. And sure enough, in due course I received a call from the recently appointed head (whose title now has been changed to “Principal”). She was delighted to inform me that I'd been accepted. And there my troubles began.


I am a journalist, now mostly retired, who for several decades served as a senior editor, and then an opinion columnist, for *The Globe and Mail*, the closest thing Canada has to a *New York Times*. Some of my opinions were controversial—or at least what passes for controversial in this country. My specialty was deflating Canada's numerous liberal pieties. I did it rather well. Among Canada's liberal elites, who take their pieties very seriously, I was an abomination.


I attracted controversy for another reason, too. In 2012, I was accused of plagiarism. While my newspaper found me guilty of nothing more than carelessness, there is no question that I screwed up by failing to attribute material to other sources. My critics gleefully seized on the incident, and I've been trolled on social media ever since. The issue also became a convenient rallying point for the mob that assembled once my appointment to the Quadrangle Society was announced (along with about two dozen other appointees).


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We are delighted to announce new Senior Fellows and Quadrangle Society Members! Welcome to the Massey Community!



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Massey College was besieged by enraged students and faculty. Racism featured heavily among the sins attributed to me, even though I'd scarcely written about race at all during my career. (This was in June, at the peak of the Black Lives Matter protests. And in that moment, some race-related accusation figured in most mobbings.)

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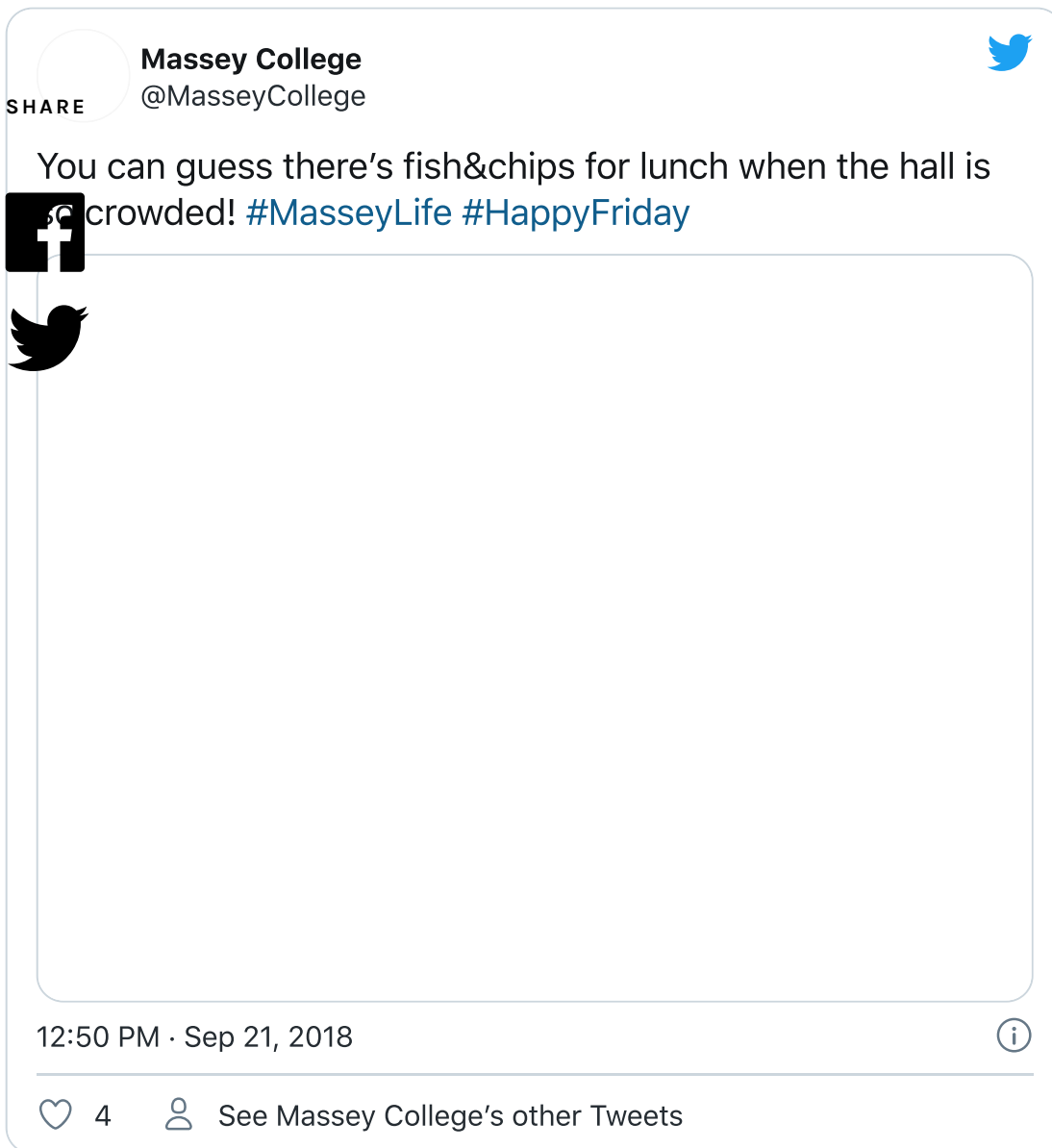
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Sexism, too. Because I had written in the *Globe and Mail* that the prevalence of rape on university campuses had been highly exaggerated, I was accused of “creating an unsafe environment for disclosures of misconduct.” I was also denounced for questioning the science behind “implicit bias” training (which has, in fact, been thoroughly discredited). I was even accused of “self-plagiarism,” the journalistic equivalent of #MeToo-ing oneself.

“I thought Massey had just resolved to educate its members about racism and microaggression and do better to create a safe and welcoming environment for marginalised people,” one complainant wrote. “And then we invited Margaret Wenté to join us? Seriously? How are my friends and colleagues supposed to feel safe sitting across from her at dinner?”

Dozens of scholars threatened to resign from the college if my appointment were allowed to stand. A few did so pre-emptively, in fact. They included Alissa Trotz, director of the University of Toronto’s Women & Gender Studies Institute. “Margaret Wenté is someone who has demonstrated consistent and outright hostility to questions of equity, women and gender studies and anti-racism,” she wrote in her letter of resignation. Trotz claimed that she hadn’t been aware of my nomination—an odd claim given that she’d been a member of Massey’s governing council and sat on the governance and nominating committee.

The Principal of the college (a francophone from Ottawa) was blindsided. She seemed to be the only person among Toronto’s intellectual elite who wasn’t aware of my chequered reputation. As for the board of governors, I don’t know how my name sneaked by them. (Actually, I *do* know. They thought the Quadrangle Society was an innocuous outfit that could continue holding its book clubs and cocktail parties in well-heeled obscurity)



It didn't help that Massey was already under a racist cloud, due to a single bad joke. Three years ago, a retired professor named Michael Marrus, then a Senior Fellow, attempted to make a clumsy poke at the old designation of "master" within Massey College. "You know this your master, eh?" he said to one of the Black junior fellows, referring to the then-head of the college. "Do you feel the lash?"

Needless to say, this joke did not go over well. Prof. Marrus was forced out, and offered his profuse apologies; as did Massey College, begging for everyone's forgiveness for longer than was necessary or dignified, and thereby setting the stage for the even sillier scandal involving me. Last year, a new principal was found who, it was devoutly hoped, would help the college turn the page: Nathalie Des Rosiers, a lawyer, academic, and former Liberal politician who once served, if you can believe it, as general counsel for the Canadian Civil Liberties association.

It was Ms. Des Rosiers who called me to deliver the unpleasant news about the firestorm. She sounded stunned, as if she'd been whacked by a two-by-four. She wasn't specific about the <sup>SHARE</sup> allegations, but apologetically told me she would have to strike a committee to look into them. She also told me she hoped this unpleasantness could be resolved by respectful dialogue. I thought this sentiment was utterly naïve. Mobs aren't interested in dialogue. The whole purpose of a mob is to punish heretics and prove to everyone where the power lies. She gently asked if I might want to resign. I said I didn't know.

Shortly after our little chat, Massey College issued a statement announcing that in light of the objections, my appointment was going to be re-examined in order to determine whether I was really fit to receive the honor that had been bestowed on me. "New information" had come to light since I'd been approved—which everyone knew was complete nonsense, since everything I'd ever written exists on *The Globe and Mail* web site and various searchable media databases. For good measure, Massey College cited the college's code of conduct, which "expresses specifically a commitment to equity and diversity," and added that "racist statements cannot and will not be tolerated." Ms. Des Rosiers hadn't bothered to inform me that this denunciation was in the works. From what I could tell, everyone at Massey was in full panic mode, completely focused on protecting their own positions.

Two days later, the Principal called me with an update. Massey's Governing Board had called an urgent emergency session to deal with the Wentle crisis. It was clear where this was heading. So I quit.



## Message from the Governing Board

On Thursday morning, Principal Nathalie Des Rosiers announced that the College, in response to new information relating to the appointment of Ms. Margaret Wenthe to the Quadrangle Society, would undertake a review of Ms. Wenthe's writings and conduct to assess whether they are consistent with the College's values.

The College has now received a letter from Ms. Wenthe stating that she does not wish to be a member of the Quadrangle Society, that the accusations against her are false and outrageous and that her record speaks for itself.

The Governing Board met earlier today to review the matter and it has been determined to accept Ms. Wenthe's resignation.

Massey College is a beacon for the expression of the widest range of academic viewpoints enriched by the interdisciplinary nature of its community based upon the fundamental precept of recognizing the dignity of all interlocutors. In order to ensure that this rich tradition continues in the context of an evolving global conversation, the Governing Board determined today to engage in a fundamental rethink of the way in which the College community interacts and operates in order to eliminate any impediments to an environment that is completely free from anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-gender identity views and discrimination of any kind. Many efforts to address these matters have been underway at the College for many months, but will become the primary focus of the Governing Board in the months to come. The College invites everyone in the community to participate in and contribute to this process.

Craig Thorburn  
Vice-Chair, Governing Board

Massey's statement announcing my resignation followed a now familiar formula, with the authors reciting lurid confessions of vast thoughtcrimes that extended well beyond inviting a former newspaper columnist to occasional literary cocktail parties. The Governing Board promised to launch a "fundamental rethink...in order to eliminate any impediments to an environment that is completely free from anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-gender identity views and discrimination of any kind." It pledged that this effort "will become the primary focus of the Governing Board in the months to come." In the few weeks between my joining the Quadrangle Society and my leaving it, the group had apparently gone from a cheese-plate book club to a full-time woke struggle session.

Without a hint of irony, the Massey College statement also described the school as "a beacon for the expression of the widest range of academic viewpoints." But as my case shows, these two goals are completely contradictory. You can raise a beacon for free expression. Or you can run a puritanical campaign to enforce moral purity and root out heretics. You can't have both. And to an astonishing extent, the people who run places with names like the Quadrangle Society have chosen moral purity.



I'm not ashamed to find myself in the company of the cancelled. Indeed, I'm proud to share this honour with some of the finest minds in the world. One example is Steve Hsu, a brilliant scientist who, until late June, was vice-president of research and innovation at Michigan State University (whose status he's helped to vastly improve). Hsu was forced out by the university's president, who caved in to pressure from the Graduate Students' Union (though Hsu will keep the academic part of his job because he has tenure). Among his sins: He mentioned published research, from his own university, that found no racial bias in police shootings. He also once wrote approvingly of peer-reviewed, government-funded research on variations in brain architecture that is now casually labelled as "scientific racism."

In the latter case, Hsu was writing about a 2015 article in the journal *Current Biology*, and his comments were not immediately seen as particularly controversial. This was only five years ago. Yet the times have utterly changed during that period. The wrong kind of science is now seen as hate speech. The same is true of any failure to place Black Lives Matter activists in the firmament of earthly angels. Even liking the wrong tweets can cost you your career. Mike McCulloch, a math lecturer at Plymouth University, was recently investigated by his employer for liking a tweet that read "All lives matter." Here in Canada, Michael Korenberg, chair of the board of governors for the University of British Columbia, was forced to step down because he liked some tweets praising Donald Trump. Nobody is safe—not even the phenomenally popular author J.K. Rowling, who has been hounded and harassed for saying that, when it comes to trans women, biology is still a thing.

My own field, journalism, has become notoriously full of little inquisitors. In the most disturbing example, James Bennet, opinion editor of the most important paper in the world, the *New York Times*, lost his job in June for publishing an opinion piece that many of the younger staffers didn't like. It was written by a Republican senator, Tom Cotton, who argued that Donald Trump would be justified in deploying military troops to cities if local police could not maintain order in the streets. Staffers claimed the piece was so toxic that it put some of their colleagues' lives in danger. Like many others, Mr. Bennet departed with a grovelling apology.

If you think the radical mob is now editing your daily paper, you might well be right. Last month, Stan Wischnowski, top editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, was forced to resign over a headline that read, "All Buildings Matter." All of this is dolefully reminiscent of China's Cultural Revolution, during which students denounced their elders and made them parade through the streets in dunce hats before they were packed off to the pig farms for re-education.

And there is no statute of limitations. Last week, Boeing Co.'s communications chief, Niel Golightly, abruptly resigned after an anonymous employee filed an ethics complaint over an article he wrote in 1987, 33 years ago. In it, the former military pilot had expressed the opinion that women shouldn't serve in combat (a mainstream position at the time). "My statement was embarrassingly wrong and offensive," he said in another cringeworthy mea culpa. "The article is not reflective of who I am."



So be warned. Everything you ever said or wrote is fair game. As the well-known social psychologist Jonathan Haidt tweeted the other day, "If scholars scan each other's collective work—every word written or recorded—searching for the least charitable reading of every snippet, we can all destroy each other."

\* \* \*

Compared to other cancel-culture targets, I'm one of the lucky ones. I no longer have a job on the line. And so I get to spend the summer reading books and visiting with friends instead of mucking out the pig farm.

As a columnist, I had strong editors to back me up. And I wrote at a time when you could speak your mind. In the last few years, by contrast, the window for even mildly controversial opinions has shrunk dramatically. It has shrunk the most at places that have traditionally prided themselves as champions of free expression. As ideological correctness becomes the modern currency of spiritual virtue, rational dissent has been cast as heresy.

I wish the folks at Massey College well. But they'll have a hard time turning their 1960s take on Oxford into a woke utopia that will satisfy their critics. And the sight of their panic is blood in the water for the same folks who came after me. There is no way they can cleanse

themselves of the stain of white privilege. Ultimately, the only way they'll be able to atone for their sins is to cancel themselves.

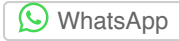
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Margaret Wentz is a former editor and columnist for the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. Now fully retired, she lives in Toronto.



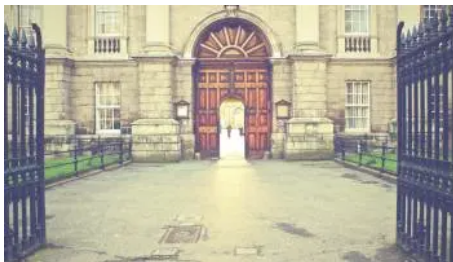
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## Comments



jdfree49

They don't care in the slightest about anything besides themselves.

The mob, and the institutions that cave to it.

Cancel these monsters. Forcefully.

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Avalonian



I don't exactly know what the word "cancel" means, but I don't think that being disinvited from a book club counts as a cancellation. Ms. Wenthe has all the privileges and speech rights that she had before this incident, so I don't think she was "cancelled" in any sense. Moreover, a private club has every right to create and enforce its own standards; if we don't like them, we can start our own clubs, right? It is much more disturbing to hear of the firings in the media that she mentions, and we should indeed oppose those firings and that silencing. But it seems to me that this particular incident is pretty tame and uninteresting by comparison. (That's Canada for you)



chris\_j

"You know this your master, eh?" he said to one of the Black junior fellows, referring to the then-head of the college. "Do you feel the lash?"

Oh Lordy. Forget racism, the sheer corniness of this is a crime against humanity. The mob did you a favor with this one.



TimonOfAthens

Sure, it's not James Damore-level bad. But the entire tedious bureaucratic wrangling speaks to the same phenomenon. A wrongspeak writer can't even sit down with a few friends in an inoffensive environment without some overdramatical agitators pointing to the witch suddenly thrust into their midst.

Wenthe herself mentions it wasn't about her own compromised future since she's basically retired. It's about the gutless actions of those who control these institutions to bow before the slightest hint of perceived opposition.

If an upscale book club filled with wealthy, convivial exchange has to be protected from the occasional cross-room glance of a woman with out-of-times political opinions who just wants to chat with friends and eat a few canapes, then what does that say about what the decision makers at these institutions will do to journalists who offer a opposing and factual retort to the madness on display in multiple issues, with multiple incidents, every day?



**Beaker**

The University Of Toronto is a woke joke.



The Globe And Mail was never a 'good newspaper'. Although The New York Times was, fitfully good in the past, the G&M was a dogs breakfast of a paper. It was a friend to Canada's oligarchs and their badly run, taxpayer subsidized, companies. It was an early 'woke' company, tolerating no criticism of native bands or organizations, no matter how corrupt and ineffectual. It hired frothing-at-the-mouths dimwitted feminists (who are still all there) shrilly attacking men-of-pallor in bad, leaden, prose. It launched the career of the excruciatingly privileged, and dim, Leah McLaren! It had two good writers and now it has one, and he's so busy grovelling for his life it's pathetic.

Margaret is missing out on some good food, and that's about it.



**TheUlcer**

What kills me is when adults use phrases like "How can we feel safe with Margaret Wente sitting across from us?" How does such a person even make it past age three without their fragile nerves exploding in a heap of weeping hysteria?



**Martin28**

(post withdrawn by author, will be automatically deleted in 24 hours unless flagged)



**neoteny**

The Globe And Mail was never a 'good newspaper'.

I read it a lot three decades ago, when there was no appreciable Internet & the G&M was black-&-white. Sure it was a Canadian liberal paper, but I still found it informative. Then I moved out to the West Coast & didn't buy it anymore.

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*July 4, 2020*

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