

PAUL AXELROD. *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800 - 1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1997). 155 pp. \$12.95 (paper), \$45.00 (HC). ISBN: 0-8020-0825-9 (cloth); ISBN: 0-8020-7815-x (paper).

Paul Axelrod's volume, *The Promise of Schooling*, is the inaugural tome in a new series from the University of Toronto Press. Entitled 'Themes in Canadian Social History', the books in this series are specifically targeted at undergraduate students and are designed to be a sort of middle-ground between specialized monographs and textbooks. Additionally, books in this series will be summaries of the main themes and provide the university reader with a general historiographical approach to the material.

The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914 purports to address several broad issues in the development of Canadian education. Clearly, public educational policy did not develop in a vacuum or in a uniform manner throughout Canada. Various regional and provincial conditions helped to form local education policy in different ways at different times for different political and social agendas. Axelrod has set himself a somewhat daunting task in attempting to cover such a wide ranging field – historically, geographically, as well as pedagogically – within the confines of some 126 pages of text. The author defines the limits of his work by posing six major questions; to wit:

- how extensive was schooling in the early nineteenth century?
- what lay behind the campaign to extend publicly funded education?
- what went on inside the Canadian classroom?
- how did schools address the needs of the Native students, blacks, and the children of immigrants?
- what social and cultural roles did universities serve by the beginning of the twentieth century?
- how were schools affected by the economic and social pressures arising from the Industrial Revolution?

Why was I left a touch unfulfilled and a bit unsatisfied when I finished reading this volume? The author had indeed dealt with the six major issues and had met the stated purposes of the series by providing a general and non-referenced running text that attempted to cover wide-ranging complex historical, political, social, and geographic material in a relatively simple and straightforward manner. Furthermore, the author appeared to take great pains to select a variety of material and

examples from all geographic areas of the country so that the book did not take on an 'Ontario first only and holy' kind of tone. Additionally, the potentially divisive issues of Native and visible minority education were tackled in a forthright manner and placed within their appropriate historical and social contexts. As well, the place of women within the expanding and evolving teaching profession itself as well as students within the university scheme was exposed to professional scrutiny.

Obviously, I am not an undergraduate education or history student and, therefore, not a member of the intended audience. However, sober reflection brought to the fore a number of issues that need to be addressed by the series editor such that future volumes do indeed meet the lofty aims that have been established. A few small particular irritants did stand out in my mind, such as, to discuss the deep religious roots and nature of the Newfoundland and Quebec school systems and make nary a mention, even via a brief and passing footnote, that substantive and fundamental constitutional changes were pending, strikes this reviewer as an oversight. Furthermore, the statement that Jews in Quebec in the nineteenth century were 'forced' to send their children to Catholic schools is questionable.

More importantly, in my view, is the almost complete lack of insightful narratives and vignettes that would provide contemporary framing and colour for the time periods and societal issues under discussion. Annie Leake and James McCurdy were two educators from the late 1800s whose stories could have formed a pivotal point for a discussion of gender roles, teaching techniques, training programs, classroom practices, and student enrollment, as well as school politics. Instead, a couple of passive, somewhat dry and all too brief third person narrative reconstructions left the reader hungering for more human contact. Similarly, at other points in this drama – for example, with Native students, girls attending church controlled boarding schools, and boys in apprenticeship situations – personal narratives would have provided that intimate link between the past and the present. Additionally, such narratives would have situated the memories of the past into a kind of personable framework that would have resonated, in my view, with the contemporary reader.

Lest I be too hard on this first volume of a new series, Axelrod does draw some universal themes to the attention of the reader and, thusly, allows the reader to see that current educational discussions are often replays of long standing issues that have weaved and intertwined themselves throughout our history. Axelrod notes that the central role or main

purpose of public schooling always seemed to be skewed by the points of view of the interest group making the claim. To some in the mid 1800s, accessible public education was a way to make literate the masses for emancipation; while others saw public schooling as the way to inculcate societal values and patriotism. Similarly, the reader is constantly reminded of how the twin issues of finances and politics appear to end up at the center of most discussions of educational policy regardless of the time frame or geographic location. Furthermore, the apparent discriminatory practices against women, Natives, persons of colour, and new immigrants can unfortunately be played out today with different characters in various communities.

Overall and taking into account my concerns in regards to historical accuracy and personal narratives, I feel that Paul Axelrod has presented a meaningful volume that fits a niche in the education landscape. Designed as a 'quick read' in order to provide an 'overall view' of a vast and complex span of time, *The Promise of Schooling* is a worthwhile addition to all professional and institutional libraries. Furthermore, for certain college and university introductory survey courses, this volume may well be an appropriate core text.

The Promise of Schooling deals with broad key educational issues over time and allows the neophyte reader an opportunity to make links between the distant and apparently isolated past and their present. As illustrative of one such possible connection, the president of the University of Toronto in 1884, Daniel Wilson, noted perhaps sarcastically that the government of the day rejected a separate college for women because "co-education is cheap" (p. 97). Ironically, I wonder if some contemporary bureaucrat will make a similar observation to a more immediate issue by noting that, and I hope that Mr. Wilson does not mind the paraphrase, "integration is cheap". I look forward to additional books in this series and trust that they will be able to grow and develop based on the strong foundation that has been laid by Paul Axelrod and *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914*.

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