

BOOK REVIEW

Wilson, J. Donald and David C. Jones (eds.). *Schooling and Society in Twentieth Century British Columbia*. Calgary: Detselig, 1980. Paper, \$11.25.

A reviewer, according to conventional wisdom, has a more difficult task when confronted with an edited text than with a single-authored one. In the former, goes the argument, clarity of focus and unity of theme are not always obvious, and the quality of work is often uneven. Although this book is not an exception to this widely held belief, unlike many others the editors offer a way out of this sometimes troublesome circumstance. In an introductory essay Professor Wilson notes that the book is a "sampler" of the research currently being done in the educational history of British Columbia. It is helpful, therefore, for the reviewer (and reader) to remember that the editors are primarily concerned with making available the most recent research related to that Province's educational history. The selection of studies that best represents this research must have been one of the important tasks facing the editors. In fairness, then, each essay should be judged on its own merits followed by a collective judgement about the 'state of the art' in British Columbia. Indeed, this response is partly invited by Wilson with his statement that "One of the main objectives of this book is to help to redress (the) imbalance" in educational history that is presently so heavily weighted in Ontario's favour.

Aside from Wilson's brief introductory essay, the samples in this volume are a number of essays on a wide variety of topics ranging from the general to the specific. Timothy Dunn, for example, has an essay entitled "The Rise of Mass Public Schooling in British Columbia, 1900-1929," while Diane Matters writes on "The Boys' Industrial School: Education for Juvenile Offenders." Other articles attempt to analyse aspects of the relationship between schooling and society by exploring such topics as: the myth of the land (David Jones), progressivism (Jean Mann), ethnicity (Jean Barman), and early childhood (Gillian Weiss). The book concludes with a selected bibliography on the history of education of British Columbia.

Those who teach Canadian educational history are painfully aware that with the single exception of Ontario there is a dearth of literature in the field. For this reason alone, this publication is a welcome addition to the literature. Not only does the work help to fill in a few of the countless parts to an enormous puzzle, but the "samplers" give us a teasing insight into the various concepts from the social sciences that can be skillfully applied to the study of educational history. By the same token, however, these essays also suggest how far we are from a synthesis.

Taken individually, each of the contributions to this book have something new to say about the development of education in British Columbia. Novelty, however, does not necessarily translate into quality and many of the articles have obvious weaknesses. Dunn's piece, for example, shows a single-minded and almost naive dependence on the *Annual Reports* of the Minister, and it would appear that "efficiency" is an inadequate concept around which to organize his data; Matters' attempt to apply Kaestle's theoretical framework seriously lacks in sophistication; Mann's essay is suggestive but lacks analysis; and Weiss could have greatly enhanced her work with oral history. Although Wilson's *Introduction* is helpful in bringing the essays together, separately, many fall short of the promise. More generally, another disappointing aspect of this book is that, for the most part, it is history from above. A good deal is written about the organizers and the administrators, but precious little about the children and what happened to them. One could overlook this emphasis if, as the title suggests, there was an attempt to explain how the school system contributed to the regionalism so evident in the Canadian social experience. One notable exception to this criticism is Jones' excellent and suggestive piece on the myth of the land. Paradoxically, it is also annoying to find important issues discussed but wrenched out of their wider social context. Even Barman's article makes only passing reference to the importance of ethnicity as a national issue.

Although it is perhaps unfair to criticize the authors for not writing another kind of book, it is fair to suggest that they might have been a lot bolder with their interpretations. At several points the authors either underestimated the explanatory power of their data or missed the significance of their work. Weiss' study, for example, suggests that much more can be said about social legislation in British Columbia and the political decision-making process. Did governments lead, or did they wait for a consensus to form before taking action? What was the risk to governments who contemplated advanced social legislation? More importantly, a closer analysis of her sources would undoubtedly yield rewarding insights into the social concerns of educators as well as much about child-rearing practices and family life. Similarly, it appears that interpretations by scholars in the United States have restrained Mann from making more elaborate claims for her research on progressivism. On the other hand, the matter of George Weir's change of attitude toward social reform after he became Minister of Education is not a surprising

turn of events. Surely it is not unusual for seekers-of-office to undergo a change of mind when they become holders-of-office. The history of public school education is replete with examples of those who, like Weir, sought the "safe" route to reform. Contemporary examples also abound. It is cheaper, and at considerable less risk, for example, that administrators will support the removal of sexist or ethnic stereotypes from textbooks rather than argue for structural changes in the system. In this regard, the comparison that Jones makes between the rhetoric associated with the "agri-myth" and general school attendance is instructive. I suspect that the agri-myth failed to attract rural youth for much the same reasons that the school promoters had difficulty drawing urban youth without compulsory legislation. For the non-supporters the school did not fit their reality and would not deliver on its promise.

To conclude, this book is an attempt to make available some of the research by students and graduates from a university that is easily becoming the most prominent centre for the study of Canadian educational history. As such, the book is a valuable addition to a sparse literature and will be particularly useful to the undergraduate. It falls short in that it does not get to the real cutting edge of contemporary scholarship. Given the leadership and past record of the historians of education presently located at the University of British Columbia, however, one can hope that this book is but a beginning in what will become a flood of excellent studies that will substantially increase our understanding of education in this country.

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