

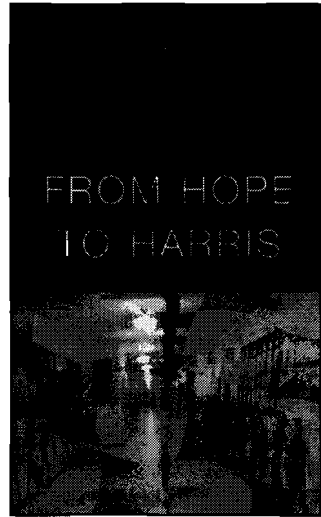
R.D. Gidney. *From Hope to Harris: The Reshaping of Ontario's Schools*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. 362.

Reading *From Hope to Harris*, Robert Gidney's masterful account of fifty years of Ontario educational upheaval, provided a journey back in time for this reviewer, a journey under the skilful direction of the most knowledgeable and most lucid guide that any tour company could provide.

Gidney argues that the title of this book "is not as ironic as it might seem." He begins his tour at mid-century, the year in which a Royal Commission on Education chaired by Justice John Andrew Hope "offered its postwar blueprint for Ontario's schools." He concludes with an account of major changes introduced by the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris in 1997-98 in its attempt to "fundamentally refashion the province's educational system." In Gidney's skilled hands, this journey through time is as intriguing as its final destination.

The journey from Harris back to Hope returned me to my own educational history: elementary school days in Port Colborne, Ontario, in the late 1940s, where the forces of progressivism and traditionalism battled for control of the curriculum; to a very traditional 1950s high school experience, with emphasis on preparation for the dreaded "departmental" examinations at the end of Grade 13; to my years as a high school history teacher in London, Ontario, as the Robarts Plan rolled over us in the early 1960s; and finally to the new Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario, in the late 1960s where we young instructors watched the counter culture sweep through the universities and naively thought we were helping launch a revolution in teacher education.

Although I left UWO for Calgary in 1969, Gidney continued to speak to me through later decades. Reading *From Hope to Harris* reminded me of what it was to write about Ontario educational history in the 1970s (when it was still relatively easy to understand), agonizing through the closing of familiar schools in my home region of Niagara



South, suffering with my school-teacher brother-in-law through financial cutbacks and teacher bashing, and finally watching that dis-spirited brother-in-law take early retirement from the Ontario school system at the youngest possible age in the 1990s.

Even for readers not present on the original journey, Gidney proves himself the ideal tour guide. Who could better explain the complicated nuances of the Ontario educational experience that are non-issues in most other provinces and draw blank stares from overseas visitors—separate schools, Grade 13, normal schools and teachers' colleges, fragmented teachers' federations? Gidney even makes the complicated and intertwined stories of school financing and governance understandable (and almost interesting) to the most casual of tourists.

What makes Gidney such a superior guide in this journey *From Hope to Harris*? Consider first his knowledge base. From "Elementary Education in Upper Canada: A Reassessment," his 1973 innovative article in *Ontario History*, to his brilliant 1996 monograph, *Inventing Secondary Education: The Rise of the High School in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (co-authored with W.P.J. Millar), Gidney has spent his career mastering the source material, analyzing the evidence, considering the implications, and in the process consolidating his reputation as a brilliant scholar of Ontario's educational history.

Gidney's account of the earlier postwar years goes far beyond my own work, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876–1976* (University of Toronto Press, 1982). He teases out the influence of Jack McCarthy on 1960s reforms, expands our understanding of high-school student radicalism at the end of that decade, and de-mystifies school finance. Everything after 1976 is new territory, with Gidney adroitly assessing the influence of successive premiers and cabinet ministers and such behind-the-scenes figures as Bernard Shapiro and George Radwanski, while explaining the intricacies of inclusive education, school violence, teacher stress, computer technology, anti-racism and gender-equity policies, financial restructuring, and school governance. As a bonus, the author knows the broader context of Ontario history and is able to link education with economics, demographics, and politics and to analyze educational change in historical context.

Additional strengths of this book? Gidney is an equally skilful interpreter of the archival sources that reveal the earlier years of his study and the newspaper sources that inform the later years. (How nice to see his newspaper sources extending far beyond *The Globe and Mail* to his own London *Free Press* and my Welland-Port Colborne *Tribune*.) And Gidney writes in a pleasant style, scholarly yet inclusive, sharing

insights with his readers. By using such seemingly throw-away expressions as "the reader may ask" (70), "the reader will note" (74), and best of all, "how does one account for?" (116), he invites those readers to take up the study with him.

Gidney invites us to speculate on the significance of change in the half century from Hope to Harris—to reassess the Hall-Dennis Report and the unhinging of tradition in the 1960s, the Davis government's funding of Roman Catholic separate schools in the mid-1980s, the Harris government's restructuring of governance and funding (and bashing of teachers) in the 1990s.

Two interpretive sections show Gidney at his best: first, his assessment of the validity of late 1970s criticism of 1960s reforms (102–09); second, a brilliant conclusion which locates the Harris reforms in the long perspective of Ontario educational history and reaffirms the "commitment of Ontario's people to do it better and get it right." (276–86)

Minor quibbles? The author downplays the impact of Alexander Galt and the Québec Protestant minority in shaping nineteenth-century separate school legislation. He neglects SEED and ALPHA and the alternative school movement of the 1970s. We don't learn much about the relationship between schools and the post-secondary sector of Ontario education.

The major problem, however, lies not with the author, but with the narcissistic nature of Ontario and its educational system. When examining its schools, Ontario has always looked at itself in the mirror, rather than admitting it might have something to learn from other jurisdictions. This pattern began at least as early as 1876, when the Ontario exhibit at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition drew rave reviews and a harvest of medals, and sent Ontario educators home with a feeling of self-satisfaction that proved a deterrent to educational innovation in the late nineteenth century that has continued through the twentieth.

Consider Ontario education's links with other provinces over the past half-century, the period documented in *From Hope to Harris*. (Readers are cautioned, however, not to look for other provinces in the book's index!) Why did Ontario pay so little attention to Alberta's innovations in teacher education in the 1940s, Québec's excursions into revolutionary pedagogy in the 1960s, British Columbia's College of Teachers, and Alberta again for changes in school financing and governance in the 1990s? Where is the Council of Ministers of Education?

We could use more detail on the relationship between Ottawa's and Québec's language policies and the expansion of francophone schools in Ontario, more on the impact of the Charter of Rights, federal immi-

gration policies, international test scores. But I forget: this is Ontario, and Ontario has no need to learn from others!

What next, then, for the author and for Ontario? Gidney long ago proved his mastery of Ontario educational history, elementary and secondary, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Let's urge him to paint on a larger canvas, to go beyond his own province and turn his attention to a comprehensive history of Canadian education. Wilson, Stamp and Audet's *Canadian Education: A History* (1970) is a generation old and looking quite dated. Ronald Manzer's *Public Schools and Political Ideas* (1994) is too policy-oriented, and lacks the drama and emotion (the blood, sweat and tears) of on-the-street, in-your-neighbourhood school change.

Who better than Robert Gidney to place Ontario educational history in a national (or even international) context?

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