

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Thomas Fleming, ed.
*Schooling in British Columbia, 1849–2005:
Voices from the Past*

Mill Bay, BC: Bendall Publishers, 2010. 321 pp.

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Thomas Fleming, recently retired from the Faculty of Education (Department of Curriculum and Instruction) at the University of Victoria, is a respected scholar who has written extensively on historical themes and current issues relating to education systems in British Columbia. In this book he has drawn upon an extensive archive of documents, photographs and oral histories to provide an engaging historical overview of British Columbia's public school system. He aims to "chart the sentiments British Columbians have held about schools since the mid-nineteenth century, and to show the various points of view individuals have expressed about schools and their purposes since this time" (17). In the process, he highlights major themes in the province's social and educational history—notably geographical determinants, competition between central and local authorities, rural and urban inequities, uncertainties caused by a natural resources-based economy, shifting political and philosophical trends, and the dynamics of race, gender and social class. The editor is knowledgeable on all periods of British Columbia history but is an expert on twentieth century issues. The relative length of the six chapters in the book, along with chapter titles and sub-titles and number of illustrations apportioned to each chapter, reflect his interests and expertise. Thus the longest and most detailed sections comprise chapters three ("Public School's Golden Age: The Institution-Building Era, 1899–1919"), four ("Schools in Good Times, Depression and War: The Era of Deferred Equality, 1920–1945"), five ("Schools in Boom Times: The Era of Consolidation and Expansion, 1946–1971") and six ("Schools in Politics and Politics in Schools: Public Education's Baroque Era, 1972–2000"). Nevertheless, key issues in the Victorian era are featured in the two short chapters that cover the colonial period (1849–1871) and the post-Confederation years (1872–1899). During those years, a non-sectarian,

publicly-funded common school system triumphed over independent, secular and denominational educational models in Canada's Pacific province. The system owed much to the efforts of the first provincial Superintendent of Education, John Jessop, a student and disciple of Egerton Ryerson.

Each chapter includes excerpts from Education Department publications and official correspondence, reminiscences of teachers and school inspectors, and newspaper reports and editorials. Most of the items were generated by white middle-class commentators, reflecting notions held by social and political groups that were predominant in British Columbia during the decades chronicled in this collection of documents. But the book also includes material illustrating the perspectives of Chinese and First Nations parents and students. Overall, Fleming has endeavoured not to be obtrusive, in order to present "as wide a variety of voices as possible [and give] individuals a chance to speak in their own words" (17). However, more exposition and contextual interpretation would be helpful in a few places for readers who may not be familiar with the historical landscape of the Pacific slope. For example, Fleming presents several photographs of cathedral-like schools in Vancouver and indicates that similar buildings, designed by prominent architects, were constructed in Victoria and other cities (102-107). The text does not explain that these handsome buildings were financed by municipal rather than provincial authorities. When these city schools were built in the early 1900s, the provincial Education Department was re-directing its resources to rural schools, in response to increased roads, railways, economic development and settlement in the hinterland of the province.

Fleming has provided citations for most of the documents, photographs and reports that make up this collection. All of the sources, bar two, are authoritative, the exceptions being a couple of amusing but possibly apocryphal rules of conduct for school teachers (66, 127). The book would benefit from a more substantial conclusion, although Fleming's introductory note to the last chapter provides some cogent summary remarks. The editor describes the last four decades as "a dark and fractious period in the province's school history," unlike earlier periods when British Columbians boasted about their schools, teachers and innovative educational programmes (273). A turning point occurred when the British Columbia Teacher's Federation campaigned aggressively for the left-wing New Democratic Party in the 1972 provincial election, thus ending a tradition of keeping "politics out of schools and the schools out of politics" (272). Since that time the public school system has often been a battlefield between the politically-activist teachers' union and fiscally-conservative provincial governments. Parents, once influential stakeholders in the public system, have been marginalized despite legislation in 2002 authorizing parent advisory councils in school districts. So, it is not surprising that enrolment in British Columbia's independent schools is increasing at the expense of the once laudable public sector.

This book would be ideal as a supplementary textbook in post-secondary educational foundations courses, although regrettably fewer such courses are now being offered in teacher-training programmes in British Columbia universities. It would also be useful in undergraduate courses on the social and political history

of British Columbia. Published with assistance from the British Columbia School Trustees Association, the Ministry of Education and the British Columbia School Superintendents Association's Active Senior Membership group, this book will certainly interest school administrators. Teachers, whether in the active or retired ranks of the profession, will enjoy it, too. Fleming is to be applauded for compiling and publishing it.