

Matt Bray, ed.
Laurentian University: A History

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Traditionally, histories of Canadian universities were particularly celebratory, chronicling the actions and accomplishments of administrators who supposedly guided their institutions through periods of growth and progress. Recent works, however, are more measured in their assessments and attempt to incorporate the experiences of faculty members, students, women, and other previously marginalized groups. *Laurentian University: A History* walks a fine line between these approaches; it is sometimes celebratory and sometimes critical and, while some sections emphasize the importance of “great men,” others highlight the roles played by other groups on campus. Ultimately, while hampered by some significant limitations, this monograph provides a useful history of the institution and is an important contribution to the history of education in Canada.

Laurentian University: A History, published in commemoration of its 50th anniversary, provides an overview of the origins and evolution of the school. It is comprised of twenty individual chapters written by individuals affiliated with the university: Guy Gaudreau, Matt Bray (who also acts as editor), Donald Dennie, Sara Burke, and Linda Ambrose. Two introductory chapters, included in the section titled “Roots,” trace the development of higher education in Sudbury and the formation of Laurentian University. The major focus of these chapters, though never stated explicitly, is the particular denominational and linguistic heritage of the institution that created its unique character. The remainder of the book is then divided into six thematic sections—university governance, academic evolution, bilingualism and biculturalism, students, the faculty association, and the role of women—which are further split into two parts, “Evolving Institutions” and “Developing Identities.” While acknowledging that these themes are not “all-inclusive,” the editor insists “they collectively encompass the core elements of the Laurentian experience that can be examined in a single volume” (xiii). Each section is also divided chronologically into:

challenges of the sixties, 1960 to 1972; era of transition, 1972 to 1985; and the modern age, 1985 to the present. One additional chapter explores the distinctive history of, and relationship between, the federated and denominational institutions—the University of Sudbury, Huntington University, and Thorneloe University. Finally, a conclusion summarizes the preceding chapters and attempts to make some overall assessments regarding the development of postsecondary education in Sudbury. While stressing certain tensions and the various challenges faced by selected groups, especially Francophones and women, the conclusion makes a particularly positive statement regarding the “tangible achievements” made by the institution. “Laurentian’s history,” it is argued, “is one of undeniable progress on many levels” (327). In the end, this work provides a detailed and well-researched overview of the first half-century of Laurentian University.

This monograph seems to be targeted at readers already familiar with Laurentian University and its geographical context. Rather than providing background information on the university and the city in which it is located, the introductory chapter reads as an acknowledgments section. Similarly, the first two substantive chapters assume far too much knowledge about northern Ontario, and Sudbury in particular, which may create confusion for some readers (see, for example, page three). An overview of the characteristics of the institution and of the region would ensure accessibility for a wider audience and would help draw together the important themes and issues raised throughout the book.

The decision to separate the monograph into thematic sections creates some relatively serious problems throughout. For instance, it leads to a great deal of repetition. As one example, faculty members and students greatly influenced the development of university governing structures, so information related to their activities is restated in the various chapters dealing with this theme. Frequently authors attempt to prevent excess repetition by referring to previous or later chapters, but this creates further confusion and limits the ability of each author to tell a coherent or complete story. Moreover, the separation of each thematic section into chronological chapters also forces a common trajectory on each distinctive narrative. Although the temporal divisions may apply directly to the structural evolution of the institution, the stories of women and linguistic groups, in particular, do not conform as well to these dates. This forces authors to artificially divide their chapters and contributes to further repetition and confusion. While decisions related to the structural division of any monograph are particularly difficult to make, and the thematic and chronological chapters are perhaps the best option in this particular instance, they nevertheless have some significant disadvantages.

The three parts of the book, “Roots,” “Evolving Institutions,” and “Developing Identities,” also have varying strengths and weaknesses. As already stated, Part A offers some useful information regarding the creation of Laurentian University but not the necessary context to fully develop this story. The following part provides a useful overview of the evolution of governing structures and academic programs and research; however, these chapters get bogged down in details without identifying an argument or explaining the larger relevance of particular developments. Furthermore,

in his chapters on university governance, Matt Bray remains too focused on individuals, organizing his entire narrative around the terms of particular presidents. This “great man” approach is dated and feels stale and awkward.

In contrast, the third part is sophisticated and nuanced. The authors, while remaining focused on their local institution, highlight important connections between national and international issues and developments on campus. For example, Guy Gaudreau identifies the Charter and Rights and Freedoms as significant to the evolution of French-language issues and Sara Burke refers to other student movements to help explain student activities at the university. Linda Ambrose is successful at connecting women’s experiences at Laurentian to wider assumptions regarding traditional gender roles and shifting societal expectations for women. These authors also effectively emphasize the diversity and complexity of their university; Burke discusses a multitude of student activities, including political protests and athletics, and explores the numerous identities, such as race, gender, language, and sexual orientation, that divided students at different moments, while Ambrose examines the different experiences of female faculty members and female staff members despite their common gender.

Overall, *Laurentian University: A History* is a useful institutional history that explores some important themes and introduces readers to the university. It includes a “great man” approach alongside a social history perspective and attempts to praise the progress and achievements of Laurentian while acknowledging the tensions and conflicts that defined its first fifty years. While further background is required, and the structure of the monograph causes repetition and a forced chronology, this book nevertheless makes an important contribution to the history of higher education in Canada.