

James M. Pitsula  
*New World Dawning:  
 The Sixties at Regina Campus.*

Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2008. 349 pp.

**Hugh Johnston**

Simon Fraser University

Regina was one of many Canadian colleges, technical institutes and seminaries to gain university status in the great expansion of post-secondary education of the 1960s and early 1970s. For nearly forty years as a small United Church secondary school, it had offered first year university courses in affiliation with the University of Saskatchewan. In 1964, it introduced a full degree program, still associated with the University of Saskatchewan. By 1974 it was a university. As a four-year college, Regina grew from 300 to 4,000 students in ten years, not the most dramatic increase in the country, but a great transformation that required moving to the periphery of Regina and a campus of stark modernist structures in a treeless landscape—a campus that promoted restless student and faculty behaviour. The students at this new four-year college, James Pitsula tells us in *New World Dawning*, were from working-class or lower-middle-class Regina, and influenced by the trade union politics of their parents and by the political energy of the first province or state in North America to elect a socialist government. Pitsula observes that one might not have expected to find the ferment of the sixties in full bloom in a prairie town like Regina, but it was there. The newness of the programs, the growth of the college, the modernity of the campus, and the make-up of the student body were all factors.

Pitsula knows the setting. His first two degrees are from Saskatchewan; he has taught for over thirty years at Regina, and has written two earlier books about Regina College. He is himself from the sixties, an undergraduate when the excitement on North American campuses was near its peak. He had been teaching for nearly twenty years before it dawned on him that the sixties were history that he had lived. That inspired him to teach a third-year course on the sixties in North America; and he has produced this book as a consequence. One gets a glimpse of what happened when

he introduced his students to what excited him in his youth. Their discussions of Kerouac are an example. Some got Kerouac but some did not.

Pitsula explains his approach as a blend of macro and micro history—the general story of the sixties as experienced at Regina College. For evidence of what Regina students were thinking, he draws on the pages of the student newspaper, the *Carillon*, which he describes justifiably as one of the best student papers of its era. He does not attempt to describe the internal workings of the *Carillon*, the ambitions and rivalries of its staff, or their personal stories, where they came from and what became of them. A couple of them went on to graduate studies at Simon Fraser University and became prominent student radicals on that intensely political campus, but that has not attracted his attention. He names the *Carillon's* editors and several of its contributors without saying anything about them. One understands from him that the *Carillon*, like other Canadian campus papers, shifted from bland reporting of campus events to activist journalism and took on issues like Aboriginal rights and the prejudice faced by First Nations people in Regina—subjects on which the *Carillon* was ahead of the mainstream press. And Pitsula adds that as the paper became increasingly partisan, it lost much of its student readership, like other contemporary campus papers. But he does not give this aspect of the *Carillon* much space. What interests him is the way that the pages of the *Carillon* document the sixties.

The *Carillon* provides Pitsula with jumping-off places for a series of sweeping summaries of the drama that defined his generation and its culture: the peace movement, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, folk music and rock and roll, the Hippies, the drug culture, the assassinations of John F. and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Black Power, Red Power, student liberation, the sexual revolution, and women's liberation. The *Carillon* reflects this great sixties canvas of upset, confrontation, creativity, change, and diversity. Its editorials, articles, and graphic images are evidence of the engagement of Regina students in the whole sixties scene which Pitsula seeks to describe. He goes back to J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac and what they were writing or publishing in 1951 to explain disaffected youth, the Beats and the Hippies; to the French return to Indo-China in 1945 to identify the origins of the Vietnam War; and to experimentation in a Swiss lab in 1938 to begin the history of LSD and the drug culture. It makes for a lively introduction to the sixties for anyone who was not there, and an engaging reminder for those who were.

The book could be improved upon with more attention to detail and accuracy on some topics. This is most apparent in Pitsula's two-page explanation of the Vietnam War—"the most divisive issue of the period." It is an important subject, but what the author offers is hit-and-miss. He says that Premier Ngo Dinh Diem "threw" the French out of South Vietnam, when the French were clearly determined to leave from the moment of their defeat at Dienbienphu. In reference to the Diem regime's brutal reprisals against opponents, Pitsula says that an elderly Buddhist monk "was soaked with gasoline and set on fire," misconstruing what was a political suicide and an important moment in the deterioration of the whole situation. And he jumps from the thousands of American military advisors sent to Vietnam under President Kennedy to the bombing campaign launched by President Johnson without mentioning the

Gulf of Tonkin resolution that put the Americans unabashedly into full-scale war in Southeast Asia. However, despite lapses like these, Pitsula does well in conveying a sense of the sixties, and especially what they meant for his generation of Canadian students.