

Paul Bennett

*The Grammar School: Striving for Excellence
 for 50 Years in a Public School World*

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Frances Helyar

Lakehead University

Readers looking for a strictly academic account of the history of the Halifax Grammar School (HGS) will likely be disappointed by Paul Bennett's *The Grammar School: Striving for Excellence for 50 Years in a Public School World*. Rather, this volume reads as a celebration of the independent school's first fifty years. The book is an interesting survey of the institution's history, with liberally illustrated pages depicting personalities important to the school's development. In addition, the appendices include eight pages listing school founders, leadership, administration, faculty, staff, student award winners and other notable individuals. These details suggest that the main audience for this slim volume is anyone with a personal connection to the school. Nevertheless, *The Grammar School* is more than just a souvenir book. The author draws on sources as diverse as HGS and Halifax Board of Education archival records, newspaper accounts, personal interviews and even blogs in order to provide an account of the ups and downs of creating a sustainable independent school.

This book also reads as a labour of love. Paul Bennett was the Headmaster of the HGS from 2005 to 2009, and as such, he may be forgiven for a lack of impartiality toward the institution he describes. The process of establishing and sustaining an independent school was a tumultuous one indeed, as evidenced by several of the hyperbolic chapter titles: "The 'Great Schism' and the Separation," "Weathering the Progressive Educational Storm," and the title of the first chapter, "Thunderclap of Reform: Hilda Neatby's 'So Little for the Mind' and the Halifax Grammar School Experiment." The latter title is the same as a previously published essay by Bennett in the *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* (2008), and major sections of that work are reprinted here in the first and second chapters. Bennett describes the founding of HGS by a group of parents dissatisfied with public education in the city

and inspired by Neatby's best-selling 1953 book. Consistently throughout the narrative, Bennett characterizes the school's supporters and faculty by their commitment to high academic standards and to "Holding the Line" while "buffeted by the strong winds of educational progressivism" (47). His skepticism regarding educational reform in the 1960s and 1970s is made abundantly clear with references to "supposedly 'progressive' ideas" (40) and "so-called educational progressives" (42). Bennett reports that "Such trends were viewed by most supporters of the Grammar School as quixotic changes born of either woolly-minded idealism or reckless irresponsibility" (41).

The history of the HGS contains a number of surprises. For example in the early 1980s an influx of Buddhist immigrants to Halifax found the tenets of the school to be to their liking, resulting in a bump in student numbers and welcome relief from the constant pressure of maintaining a sustainable enrollment. Bennett also notes the school's brushes with celebrity, including Hollywood actress and alumna Ellen Page, and U.S. President Bill Clinton, who was challenged by a Grade 11 HGS student during a 1995 Halifax press conference. Recurring disputes between strong personalities and problems with physical space provide examples of more commonplace challenges faced by independent and publicly funded schools alike.

The travails of setting up the school are at times amusingly recounted, although the repetition of certain incidents suggests that the portions reprinted from the earlier essay were inserted without an editor's close attention to continuity. Several passages in the book describe the competition between HGS and other Halifax schools whether independent or public. The Dartmouth Academy, for example, was established in 1963 by a group of faculty and parents who broke away from HGS, and Bennett reports that the Academy "capsized in 1981" (59). This and other episodes hint at a rich history of education in Nova Scotia. Independent schools of much longer standing than HGS include King's-Edgehill School dating from 1788, and Armbrae Academy (formerly the Halifax Ladies' College) from 1887. Carolyn Gossage's 1977 history of independent schools in Canada, titled *A Question of Privilege: Canada's Independent Schools*, recounts the founding and progress of these older institutions, but only mentions HGS in passing. A contemporary study of the collective history of these schools would be a most welcome addition to the history of education east of Quebec.

In the meantime with this publication, the interesting history of independent schools in Nova Scotia is only partially told. Paul Bennett appears poised to fill the gap in our understanding of schools in the Maritimes, given the recent publication of his account of the history of public school closures in the region. This is a hopeful sign that he intends to continue his research in the same geographical region, and perhaps one day he will turn his attention to a broader history of independent schools in Nova Scotia and perhaps all of eastern Canada.