

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

Thomas Fleming

*The Principal's Office And Beyond*

**Vol. 1:** *Public School Leadership in British Columbia, 1849–1960.*

**Vol. 2:** *Public School Leadership in British Columbia, 1961–2005.*

Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 2010. Vol. 1, viii, 448 pp. Vol. 2, xii, 360 pp.

**R.D. Gidney**

University of Western Ontario

As Thomas Fleming notes in the preface to this welcome new book, very little is known about school principals in Canada. It could well be added that, beyond his own distinguished work, there is precious little description or analysis of the history of Canadian educational administration generally. In this two-volume history, Fleming has set out, in part at least, to rectify that situation. His central focus is the changing role of British Columbia's elementary and secondary school principals—their work, status, education and experience, relationships with teachers, pupils, parents, district and central school administrators, and their larger communities. But the book might aptly be described as a history of education in British Columbia from its beginnings to the present, told through the prism of the principalship.

Fleming's account is set within a rich context, including pertinent aspects of British Columbia's social history, the growth of the school system as a whole, the evolution of its organizational structures, developing bureaucracies, routines of regulation, and record-keeping, changing fashions about administrative and pedagogical thought, and vivid, penetrating sketches of many participants and of principals', teachers', and pupils' lived experience. It is not quite a comprehensive history—there are topics left out or that get short shrift, including any close quantitative analysis of pupil records or changing patterns of school attendance. But this is as complete and thorough a history of British Columbia schools as exists, and largely supplants Henry Johnson's 1964 survey. Nor is it parochial in the message it delivers: since the main themes, ideas, and conflicts he discusses are the same as those animating educational developments in other parts of the country, any student of Canada's educational history will benefit by learning from it.

It is also refreshing to find a book that seriously addresses policy issues in their historical context. Nor is Fleming afraid to pass judgement even when it goes against the grain of fashionable opinion and sometimes half-baked theorizing. Among the book's riches, I was particularly impressed by the major revisionist interpretation of the place of women in educational administration, which, in itself, demands the attention of everyone interested in twentieth-century Canadian education. There is also a fascinating account of the stormy and depressing record of yet one more provincial "reform" of curriculum and instruction during the 1980s and 1990s. There are, as well, important insights into changes in administrative practices and styles and the gap between theory and practice, including changes in the study of educational administration, which Fleming sees as retrograde developments. Finally, we are offered a surprisingly negative view of the present and future prospects of public education in British Columbia which deserves reflection by all those interested in the state of Canadian schooling.

The book is very well written, and this senior citizen at least appreciated the pleasingly large print. It is a sprawling text; occasionally the detail gets the best of Fleming and he loses his normally tight control over the narrative. It might have been more convenient if some of his central themes had been grouped together rather than spread across several chapters—his treatment of gender is a good example. The book would have been better with a bibliography and an index that provided more detailed guides to the topics he covers. But these are minor complaints. Fleming's contribution belongs amongst a relative handful of important monographs on Canadian educational history published over the last three or four decades and deserves a wide readership—and not just amongst those particularly interested in British Columbia.