

Wayne Urban, ed.  
*Leaders in the Historical Study of American  
 Education*

Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011. 325 pp.

**Jason Ellis**

The University of British Columbia

The story is familiar to educational historians: before 1950, relatively little scholarly attention was paid to the historical development of formal and informal education. The history of education was mostly practised by people writing institutional histories, usually in a celebratory tone. After 1950, the study of educational history was transformed, revolutionized in fact, by one or two generations of historians who took a more scholarly approach to the topic. In *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education*, editor Wayne Urban has collected eyewitness accounts (biographies) from 26 educational historians. The book is one of three volumes in the Sense series “leaders in educational studies,” edited by Leonard J. Waks.

Most of the essays Urban commissioned are approximately 10 pages long. The history of schooling, higher education history, and the history of education more broadly-conceived are all represented as fields. Urban recognizes Bernard Bailyn for his pioneering contribution to the field after 1950 by inviting Bailyn to write the book’s foreword. Many of the essayists also recognize Bailyn this way, alongside Lawrence Cremin, who was graduate advisor to numerous contributors. Urban also prepared a brief introduction to the volume, along with his own biography. The afterword is by Kate Rousmaniere, an appropriate choice given her esteemed scholarship on the history of educators.

One of the book’s chief strengths is the authors’ descriptions of their intellectual journeys, and how experiences, often serendipitous, have shaped their scholarship. Commonalities, or themes, fairly particular to the history of education field emerge as well. One is the large number of the historians represented in this volume who were at one time schoolteachers or education majors. The schoolteacher background of education scholars is sometimes seen as a weakness of the “Ed school.” (David

Labaree, who contributed to the present volume, has written on this topic.) These biographies show that schoolteachers can produce top-notch, critical and thoughtful historical scholarship. It is interesting that while a large majority of American schoolteachers are women, 20 of the 26 “leaders” in educational history profiled in this book are men. The traditional gendered division of educational work—women teach the lower grades, men can move up through the ranks to professorships—is also reflected in the history of education field. The gender imbalance in the book is shaped as well by the format of the Sense “leaders in educational studies” series, which profiles “established” (ix) scholars and therefore has captured a group of late-career academics, a crowd that usually includes many more men than women.

Despite the focus on the seasoned scholar, biographies in this book still serve as models of action for the newest generation of educational historians. Every scholar has to start somewhere and we learn through the book’s essay that well-respected historians come from many different, often surprising, places. Toil, circumstance, and sometimes strange fortune, saw the previous generation through to success in uncertain times, which the field faces again today. Bailyn, in the foreword, and Rousmaniere in the afterword, both explore serendipity as one of the book’s main themes. It is revealed in the book, for example, that Michael Katz once sold encyclopaedias and that John Rury drove a cab in New York City, before each became a full-time historian. In his especially touching essay, William Reese talks about the education he received through his experiences and associations as a working-class kid, growing up in a blue-collar town in the 1960s. “While I am grateful for everything schools have done for me,” Reese writes, “the out-of-school lessons of growing up in northeastern Pennsylvania shaped everything that followed” (253). Reese’s advice to undergraduates he teaches, on social class and mobility in America: “[C]hoose your parents carefully.” (251). Personal stories bring humanity to the book. They also underscore that class, gender, race, culture, and the intertwined problem of social mobility, are powerful themes in these biographies and in American educational history. Little wonder that the field has been so profoundly interested in—and at times so bitterly divided over—questions of education and equality.

I will venture one caution, and one criticism of the book. The caution: Historians know better than most that memory is fallible. Sol Cohen offers some honest advice to readers of his essay. Keep it in mind when approaching the rest of the volume: “Though I vow to be as truthful as possible, skepticism should abound” (33). My criticism is one Urban acknowledges. The book seems to be missing some autobiographies. In fact, Urban originally invited 30 “leaders” to contribute. Four invitees did not submit essays, for different private reasons. We also learn that three of these four are “minority scholars” (1). Consequently this group is underrepresented in the volume. Urban takes ownership of this shortcoming, writing in his introduction that he is “regretful” (1) that the three minority scholars were not included.

As a final thought, I can’t resist wondering out loud what a book called *Leaders in the Historical Study of Canadian Education* might look like. In fact, early plans for this American version included Canadians, Australians, and Brits. But a choice was made to focus on the United States, justifiably because of the distinctly national

character of education histories. Urban mentions the possibility of a follow-up international version. The field in Canada has produced a crop of scholars as accomplished, and as respected in these parts, as the contributors to this American volume. The Canadian version would include teachers-turned-historians, themes of class, race, gender (and language and religion), stories of opportunity and serendipity. What sort of lore would it explore? Who is the better musician, Gidney on clarinet or Curtis on piano? Who knows more nuns, Smyth or Titely? Which current educational historian, also at one time a Dean of Education, was a campus radical in his student days? Canadians have to be satisfied with the occasional feature “Growing up in...” in this journal (*HSE/RHE*), which profiles the formative experiences of historians who have shaped the field in Canada. Nevertheless, Americans and Canadians, our shared histories and historiographies, and our collegial bonds, bring us together. That on its own is a reason that *Leaders in the Historical Study of American Education* deserves a Canadian readership.