

**Book Review**

# The University of Toronto: A History, Second Edition

Martin L. Friedland

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013

Reviewed by: Chris Hyland  
University of Calgary

To write a single-volume history of a university is a daunting, difficult, and largely thankless task. The author has only so many pages to cover so much history. What gets put in; what gets left out? The interests and concerns of multiple and competing groups have to be juggled and massaged. Does the author write for historians, the public at large, or alumnae? The author needs to construct a narrative that is both readable and enjoyable but also analytical and critical. How far can one criticize the institution that likely sponsored the work? When writing *The University of Toronto: A History*, Martin Friedland faced many difficult choices. Some worked; many did not.

Friedland chooses a chronological format for his text. The result is a story of the University of Toronto's progressive and triumphant expansion from a small liberal arts college into the billion dollar multiversity of today. For much of the narrative, the author recounts facts focusing on the growth of buildings, programs, and faculty. Three chapters are remarkable exceptions. Chapter 9 on the admission of women to the university, Chapter 15 on the student strike, and Chapter 36 on student activism are excellent works of history. These three chapters are contextualized, provide multiple perspectives, and explore in detail the how and why of events and decision-making. They are welcome diversions to the chronology and provide an alternative example of how Friedland could have structured his text. Other areas that have been arranged chronologically could have been better organized in a thematic manner. For example, the reception and controversy surrounding Darwinian thought is present in the text but is fragmentary, disjointed, and easily missed. Scattered through three different chapters, the force of Charles Darwin's impact on the university dissipates into obscurity.

Friedland chooses to focus his text on the elite: administrators, faculty, politicians, and businessmen. The result is a top-down and administrative-political history where students are largely reduced to numbers and most of the professoriate and support staff remain faceless. This decision is out of step with the latest trends in the history of higher education. Over the last few decades, historians of higher education have tended to focus on student and professorial cultures and issues of class and gender. One example that represents the more recent scholarly work is James Pitsula's *As One Who Serves: The Making of the University of Regina*. Because Friedland focuses so much of his narrative on administrators, the reader is left wondering about questions fundamental to the university experience. What would it be like to be a student at the University of Toronto at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or before the Second World War?

Unfortunately, it is not until page 308 that there is a sustained examination of student activities, and students do not become a large part of Friedland's narrative until the 1950s. Moreover, the collective experiences of faculty and support staff, with a few notable exceptions, are largely absent. One bright spot in Friedland's book is his close attention to the topic of gender. The author must be given full credit for his focus on female faculty and students as he made a conscious effort to include the experiences of women in all chapters of his text.

Friedland's choice of overarching premise, "the history of the University of Toronto is the history of Toronto, the history of Ontario, and the history of Canada. It is intimately connected with events outside the university" (p. lii) is correct to a limited extent. Friedland is right to suggest that a university is closely tied to the community in which it operates. Several themes in Canadian history are present in the university's history: the drive for secularization in education, community responses to war, the connection to the British Empire, and women's struggle for equality. However, Friedland's text provides little historical context for the growth and change experienced at the University of Toronto. The upheaval and disorientation associated with the industrialization and urbanization of Canada is largely absent. The changing makeup of Canadian society through immigration and issues concerning labour and unions are largely overlooked.

Three other concerns need to be mentioned. First, the book needs at least one comprehensive map of the entire campus. Friedland's continual references to buildings and streets is disorienting without a solid reference. A picture of the campus appears on page 402 but it comes too late and is too small. Several maps, strategically placed throughout the book, showing the evolution of the campus, would be better. Second, the decision to not include footnotes in the book is deeply troubling. Without the presence of footnotes or endnotes, ambiguity exists as to where the information comes from. As a supplement, University of Toronto Press provides detailed notes for purchase or on its website. These options are unsatisfactory: one represents a money grab, the other presumes internet access. Third, Friedland relies on secondary source material for many of his key conclusions. As examples, the section on Frederick Banting and the discovery of insulin draws heavily from Michael Bliss's (1984) work; the sections on Frank Underhill are a recitation of Michiel Horn's (1999) arguments. At times, Friedland's text devolves into a synthesis of secondary material offering few new or critical insights based on archival sources.

Friedland's first edition of *The University of Toronto: A History* was published in 2002 celebrating the institution's 175th anniversary. The second edition (2013) was published over 10 years later bringing the university's history up to date by recounting the growth and change of the last decade. This second edition will appeal to people associated with the University of Toronto—former staff, alumnae, and current students—because it narrates the proud heritage of the institution and its outstanding contributions to all fields of academic work. The story of how the university came to be one of the premier research institutions in the world is well documented. The book will also appeal because of its readable prose and short and punchy chapters. However, the text offers little value to historians of higher education. Many of the key arguments and debates can be better accessed in other works.

## References

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*Chris Hyland*, B.Ed, MA, is a PhD Candidate in history at the University of Calgary. He was also a high school teacher with the Langley and Abbotsford School districts, and a university instructor in South Korea. His research interests include the internationalization of English-Canadian academia after the Second World War.